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Dalit Literature and Black American Writing:A Comparative Study

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Introduction:

‘Tribal and Dalit literature’ as the name suggest is literature written by the Dalits about their lives. Dalit is an umbrella term under which comes the term ‘Tribal’. Dalit literature forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature.

If the Dalit is the protagonist of India ‘s boycotted society, the African American is the protagonist of Black America. One is robbed and degraded by the White society and the other by Savarna society. One is brought and sold from one’s own home land and the other was called untouchable by birth.

It is observed that Dalit and African American, both the societies are engaged in similar kinds of liberation movements. Given that the two societies are different in terms of place and time, it is understandable that there should be certain limitations and differences in their literatures. On the other hand, there are similarities too. While the negritude movement among the Blacks helped them face the tide of racism and colonialism, a similar movement among the Dalits of India may have helped build confidence. Dalits in India have several times been compared to the condition of colonized African slaves. However, the Dalits have led life under a far more sinister culture, mostly oppressed by upper classes of India. Africans were captured, brought to America and sold since August 1619. With this the slavery of African Americans began. Dalit society, on the other hand, has experienced slavery since ancient times. Unlike the Blacks, whose motherland is Africa, from where they were captured to be sold in America, India is the motherland of the Dalits. They are not from somewhere outside. In better words I can say “Slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery”. **This paper compares Dalit Literature and Black American Writings i.e. Untouchability and Apartheid**

Dalit is the protagonist of India’s boycotted society and the African American is the protagonist of Black America. One is befooled and deceived by Savarna society while the other is depressed by the White. One is slave while the other was called untouchable by birth. There are ample grounds to compare the brief history of the Blacks in USA and the age long ancient history of misery of Dalits in India. There are similarities also of both these black peoples especially in their sufferings and miseries, destitution and hunger, education and culture, denial of entry into Churches and Temples, untouchability and apartheid, above all total exclusion from the social order.

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Africans were captured, brought to America and were sold like animals. With this cruel act on humanity the slavery of African Americans began to flourish. Dalit society, on the other hand, has experienced slavery since ancient times when Indian history was in its infant stage. Unlike the Blacks, whose motherland is Africa, from where they were captured to be sold in America. India has been the motherland of the Dalits. They are not from somewhere outside the Indian society and culture but they were not accommodated in Indian culture. Racism originated as an ideological support for slavery. **Slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery.** In America the practice of slavery supported a racism perpetualism. White Americans who enslaved Africans for hundreds of years would develop a doctrine of inferiority to nationalize the oppression. Once the concept of slavery and subordination developed, a symbolic and mutually reinforcing relationship evolved. Not only black characters in American fiction, but even the black writers are on the search for identity. Just like racism which is a prominent factor in dividing people in Western history, the caste system, a deep-rooted evil which is a blot on Indian culture, affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural systems of Indian society and culture.

Another theory is based on the Rig-Veda, the so called sacred text of Hindus; humanity is divided into four varnas- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. In the social hierarchy, first come the people of Brahmins who subjugated the rest three varnas. Then comes Kshatriyas who are rulers and warriors. Vaisyas form the third segment who is land owners and merchants. In the last rung of hierarchy are the servants and others, especially artisans. These were the most oppressed and exploited people. Some specific professions were identified like butchers, leather workers, launderers and latrine cleaners, who were labelled untouchables. It is important to understand that caste and race are distinct and not mirror images of each other in nature. But economic situation of the lower castes in India often resembles that of blacks in the US. Both the systems have provided an integral base for the local histories. Major events based on racial differences have punctuated USA's social, political and economic history. Similarly, the caste system has served as the foundation of India's socioeconomic history for several centuries. But one of the major differences was that the race and the racial differences got support from the pseudo-scientific section of the society while the caste difference got the Brahminical Hinduism support in India. This shows mental slavery of depressed section which was consequence of perpetual harassment done by Brahmins.

Dalits and the African Americans, to the large extent are distinctive groups that occupy a similar position in their respective societies- the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. But even these systems of hierarchies are different in nature. Here are two different societies-America's first developed identity with its urbanization, affluence, industrialization and India's so-called Third world identity, with its poverty, overpopulation

and a wide gap between rural and urban life styles. Thus, the Dalits, occupying the lowest rung in Indian society, is in an absolute position quite below the average African American.

Black literature as genre of literature generally came into eminence in the late 18th century. Two hundred years later, the field of Black literature has evolved to the point where there is no questioning its role in American history, society and culture. In America, Blacks were deprived of all the opportunities of job, position and fundamental rights which would have been their basic right as human beings. What they got from their new owners is the bestial treatment of inhumanity and deprival of human dignity, they were not only denied their African culture to prolong to their next generation but they were also not given a chance to assimilate in the American culture.

There is little class mobility; unlike in the United States where citizens can freely travel between classes with little difficulty. The caste system in India is also affiliated with religion, particularly in Hinduism. This suggests the caste discrimination is based on religious grounds and beliefs, with the higher castes even being considered priestly and having dominion. Despite the differences in the race and caste systems, the issues have been raised and addressed through similar actions and policies which prove very affirmative in nature. In both these cases of Dalits and Blacks, God did not ordain the slavery but scripture were wrongly interpreted to make the trodden-mind slave. Human beings created it. Having imposed slavery on Blacks and Dalits, Whites and Savarna Hindus forcibly extracted labour from them. In America, Whites assigned separate educational institutions, separate eating places, separate spaces in trains and buses, and separate residential areas to African Americans to abode. In India, untouchables were kept outside the shadow of village. Arrangements were made for them to have separate settlements, separate river banks and separate cremation grounds. Since low caste people were denied any right to education by the Hindu caste system, the question of separate educational institutions did not arise. This highlights even the worst form of slavery comparing to apartheid. Later, during the British reign, when the lower sections were allowed to get education, they had to sit in a separate corner or outside the threshold of the class room. It is interesting to know that there was a direct influence of Blacks on Dalits and Dalits on Blacks. It got reversed in the late 1960s and 1070s when the militant Black Panthers and their claims of Black Power motivated a group of young Dalit poets and activists to compose outrageous art in order to shatter the complacency of evil Brahminical ideologies. They proudly called themselves Dalit Panthers.

In the late 1960s through 1970s the Black Power and Black panther movements not only gave rise to a militant resistance to white oppression but it also witnessed the emergence of anti-white establishment art. Adapting to similar ideology, in 1972 a group of young Marathi Dalit artists in India called them the Dalit Panthers and embraced violent politics and aesthetics to resist caste supremacy. They were the first to use the word Dalit which became an accepted term for the untouchables but there is a contextual difference between the degree of treatments they received from their respective society.

The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in number of ways. While the African Americans were slaves, they could buy their freedom with money. Though Dalits were technically not slaves, they could not even pay to rent a house. The White masters were responsible for looking after the Black slave. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savannas had no concern for them. Untouchables are societal slaves. The cause of the African slavery was economic. The cause of the Dalits untouchability is social. African American can do any type of labour but their labour was not considered undignified, while

Dalits can perform the lowest type of the job but his labour is always termed undignified. While African American cannot hide the colour of his skin, Dalit cannot hide his caste.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in 1920 began to lead the movement against Untouchability in the Western State of Maharashtra. He himself was a son of Mahar (one of the Untouchable communities) who received his high-school education in Bombay presidency. He believed in the power of education and considered it as a major tool to eradicate the untouchability from India. His first-hand experiences at Manhattan where he has seen Harlem of vast African –American communion also helped in his increased sensitivity towards this marginalization. In 1946, he wrote to W.E.B. **Du Bois**, the prominent African-American scholar: There is so much similarity between the positions of the untouchables in India and of the position of Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary. It was very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the U.N.O. (United Nations Organization). The untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit. There are similarities in their histories too. The African–American literature is known as —Literature of Slaves which is as old as the existence of history of human civilization.

Even in Aesop’s stories, it is mentioned that Aesop was a slave in the ancient Greece, toiled for his masters and composed those stories whenever he could find time and inclination to write. Black American literature is also as old as American civilization. The slaves, who were brought from Africa to work on the plantations of the white men, sang to themselves the songs of their miseries. These songs which came down from generation to generation in the oral form are known as blues. These blues were the source of inspiration to many poets of the Harlem Renaissance of this century like Langstaon Huges, Claude Mackay, Countee Cullen etc. These blues also inspired many composers of jazz music in America during 1920s.

The first book to be published by a slave in America was **An Evening Thought Salvation** by Christ with Penitential Cries by Jupitar Hammon in 1760. He was followed by a girl named **Philis Wheatly** who produced a fair amount of poetry and won the attention of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Another slave who was employed in the home of the president of University of North Carolina was George Moses Horten who composed beautiful poems and published them in 1829. His biography by Richard Walser was published in the 1970s under the title *The Black Poet*. In 1940s and 50s, three Black writers made invaluable contribution to what at that time was called Literature of the Blacks in America and to the American Literature in general. **Native Son by Richard Wright, Invisible man by Ralph Ellison and Go tell It on the Mountain by James Baldwin** produced new vistas for mapping racial prejudice through a genre which subverted all the accepted notions about the blacks in America. As R. Bhongle observes: —The above mention three novels are the record of a common experience. These novels reveal attitudes of the whites towards the blacks and its devastating effects on the psychology of the blacks. They expose what Richard Wright calls Bigger Thomas behaviouristic Pattern resulting out of frustration and alienation. There are also many cultural influences between African Americans and Dalits. Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison was very popular in India and its translation and manifestation were seen in Indian languages.

Historical background of Dalit writers in India is interwoven with the term Dalit in the life, literature and history of India. Dalits have no literary history of their own and they had produced no literature till the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The names, however, like Shambuka in the Ramayana, Eklavya in the Mahabharata, Valmiki, the great composer

and poet of the Ramayana and a few others in the ancient times and Chokhamela, Rohidas and some others in the medieval period could be considered the predecessors of the present Dalits and Dalit literature. But we don't have any literature created by these people who could furnish some major account of their own and their people. Dalit literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge in post independent India. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of the untouchables to a self-chosen identity as a Dalit is described in the collective writings over centuries. Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jotirao Phule were the epitome of the word Dalit as a noun and an adjective.

The term Dalit Literature was first used in 1958, at the first Dalit conference held in Bombay in independent India. But the term Dalit came into recognition in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization namely Dalit Panthers. The name suggests their feelings for kinship, unity and solidarity with Black Panthers who started a radical fundamental struggle for African-American rights in the U.S.A. The Literary fronts of Dalits and African American also have many similarities. Though African American and Dalit movements have proceeded along different paths and taken different shapes, the core of both the movements was the same. Both are story of struggles for human rights and values.

As observed by M.D.Nalavade: Hindu literature, one has to accept willingly or unwillingly, is not all-inclusive and deals with life and aspirations of Brahmins. It does not talk about the life and aspirations of the Shudras, especially of the down-trodden people, even if they cover wider scale of the Hindu population. Since the dawn of Hindu civilization, the art of writing has monopolized by the Brahmins and because Brahmins stand on the highest rung of Hindu society, they never cared for others in Hindu society. Saint Namdev and Saint Tukaram were also a part of the same tradition and raised their voice against the fact that the untouchables were deprived of reading the Vedas because of their caste. The tradition of Dalit writing gave birth to an intellectual tradition which travel through the followers of Buddhism and Siddhas and Naths reached the Dalit saints in the medieval period. This dalit consciousness pioneered by Chokhamela and Kabir continued influencing almost all the native languages of India. In the second half of the nineteenth century, during the British regime in India, for the first-time non-Brahmins started writing. Next to Mahatma Phule comes Kishanrao Bhalekar who started a non-Brahmin newspaper Deen Bandhu in 1888 from Mumbai. The movement was further strengthened by Shahu Chhatrapati, the ninth king of Kolhapur, in Maharashtra. He is the pioneer of social democracy. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Dalits started writing and publishing their agonies, hardships and inhuman treatment given to them by the Brahmins and caste Hindus through pamphlets and small booklets. In Maharashtra, Gopal Baba Valangkar, a Mahar by caste, wrote and published his first booklet with the title Vital Vidransak Pustika. In pre-Ambedkar period, in Maharashtra there were some writers like Pandit Kondhiram, Kisan Phagojiansod, Shivram Janaba Kamble from Pune etc. but their contribution to literature was not significant. But this added the cumulative impact on the overall Indian consciousness towards such writings. India is a nation with many linguistic regional groups and in each of such groups the untouchables have the language of that region and sometimes their own. It is therefore difficult to study all the languages and find out names of Dalit writers of different regions in India before the inception of Ambedkar writings and times. This was the period when Dalits remained un-unified and no movement either of the literary activity or social reform took place as it did after the rise of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. But surprisingly, even for Dr. Ambedkar, it was not his mother tongue Marathi which helped him; it was through English language that he created a united front and a unifying force for all the Dalits in India. However, it is found from the writings of Dalits in different parts of

India, that there is the same voice and expressions of agonies and tragedies under the religious slavery of Hindus.

There are many contrasts between Blacks in America and the Dalits in India. The former has only 400 years of history, but the latter, more than 3000 years of history. One was a product of modern Capitalism, its ruthless drive for profits, super profits, search for cheap labour and also based on racism and Colonialism. The latter was a result of hereditary division of labour in an ancient subsistence level economy which was also based on a form of ancient racism as enforced by invading White Aryan immigrants against native Black peoples legalized by a sacred law and a written constitution, probably the first in history, (Manu Code in Manusmriti) of the then socio-political order ordained by a divine religious theology (Vernashram Dharama), all in the name of gods.

American Blacks as well as Indian Dalits were the sons and daughters of darkness journey through explaining sorrows and sufferings. Dalits are the native sons of India. But unfortunately, they were disowned by the high caste Hindus for century together— Today the Dalit writer asks: What is India to me? An enigmatic land, a dream, or a nightmare? Or a puzzling riddle? He is in search of answers to these questions. What it means to be an Untouchable or a pariah? He knows very well that his fore fathers sprang out from the same womb as Brahmins came out. Why then was he rejected by the mother? Why and how? Who is responsible for this inhuman act? His questions are many. They issue forth from what, who, why, and how. The question he asks seems to be simple but their answers are amazingly complex. The American Black writer faces the same dilemma. What is America to me? But he knows at the same time that forefathers were brought to America in chains and auctioned on the shores of Atlanta. The Black Americans have irrigated the fertile land of liberty with their blood, tears and sweat. The white settlers defied their women and lynched them to death. The development and progress of America owes a lot to their labour. They increased the fertility of the American agricultural land and made it a Cotton King. They also strengthened the industrial output of America and made it what it is today- a land of crowning glory.

Other marginalized groups like Tribal and Nomadic communities. We have many prominent writers today like Laxman Mane, laxman Gaikwad, Kishore Kale who have made a big impact for their communities through their writings. They have asked similar questions like any other oppressed class across the world, like Blacks in America; who are we? What is our place in Indian society and history? Why is our situation so marginal? From where do we find our roots? Another very important phenomenon to be observed in the rise of this literature is its originality. The writes are celebrating their heritage in their own idioms. They have their own aesthetics. Their dance, music and folklores, all are included and celebrated in their voices. The American Blacks have their own black aesthetic theory.

African American literature is referred to in the context of Dalit literature. But Blacks are not untouchable. Untouchability is a denial of humanity. This makes a big difference between these two literatures. Both the literatures are searching for self-identity. The experiences narrated in both literatures are based on inequality and have been drawn from social life. Both the literatures are life-affirming and resulted from their authors' commitment. The language of both literatures is the language of Cultural Revolution which is in search for new cultural identity and values.

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