

“WHAT IS DALIT LITERATURE” AN ESSAY BY SHARATCHANDRA MUKTIBODH



Classroom Notes for
BA English, Semester VI
ENGL3025: Dalit Literature

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A note on these notes...

- Do you think this PPT can replace an actual classroom, where you gossip with your friends and peacefully sleep during by my long-winded antics?
- **Of course, not.**
- Do you think this PPT can replace the texts prescribed in your syllabus?
- **Of course, not. Then what are these notes worth?**
- These notes are just to excite your curiosity for the ideas discussed. To reap most benefits of the notes, read the texts first.
- By the time, you must have noticed there are two inks used here. It's an interactive PPT. The black ink is for me and the red is yours. Pause and think when the **red ink** appears. Wow end-rhyme. And, click on the hyperlinks.



Sharatchandra Muktibodh

- Sharatchandra Muktibodh (1921-1984) was an Indian poet, novelist and literary critic who wrote in Marathi.
- Muktibodh's prolific contribution formed a part of a growing field of Indian literature, named Dalit Literature.
- He was bestowed the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1979 for his work *Srushti, Saundarya Ani Sahityamoolya*.
- Here are some his notable works in Marathi:
 - *Sarahadda* (a novel)
 - *Jan He Wolatu Jethe* (a novel)
 - *Nawi Malawat* (poetry collection)
 - *Satyachi Jat* (poetry collection)



What is Dalit Literature

- Sharatchandra Muktibodh's essay titled "What is Dalit Literature" responds to a vital question concerning this field of literature in India that began taking shape since the 1950s and is growing by leaps and bounds till date.
- Before delving into the essay, let's pause and think what one means by Dalit Literature?
- The term 'Dalit' would translate as 'crushed', or 'pounded'. Metaphorically, it would mean oppressed, marginalised, or subaltern. 'Dalit Literature', therefore, might mean the literature of those that are oppressed.
- Is Dalit Literature about the oppression of people, or the literary expression of the oppressed people? Is it concerned with any specific kind of oppression?
- Let's discuss in the next slides.



What is Dalit Literature

- Let's hear out what Arjun Dangle, a noted Dalit writer has to say about it.
- Arjun Dangle deems Dr B. R. Ambedkar as the father of Dalit Literature, even though Dr Ambedkar “has not done any creative writing” (238). His struggle against untouchability and towards liberation of Dalits in India enabled the emergence of Dalit Literature.
- Dangle writes, “the first conference of Dalit writers” was held in 1958 in Bombay organised by Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha. In the same conference, the Resolution 5 reads, “the literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit literature” (242).
- It would be a good starting point to read Dr Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” to get a cursory idea of his inspiration behind Dalit movement and literature. [Here is one version of it](#). You can read about Dr Ambedkar as well as his works [here](#).



Epicentre of Dalit Literature

- In the beginning, Maharashtra was the epicentre of Dalit literature. Here are some key moments of its gradual progress.
 - Anna Bhau Sathe's speech in the first conference concerning Dalit Literature in 1958,
 - BabuRao Bagul's short story collection *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti (When I Had Concealed My Caste)* in 1963,
 - The launching of *Asmitadarsha* journal by [Gangadhar Pantwane](#) at Milind College, Aurangabad (founded by Dr Ambedkar) in 1968,
 - Debates concerning Dalit Literature in the periodical *Marathawada* in 1969,
 - Establishment of Dalit Panther movement in 1972 with writers and activists like Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar.
- **Task for you. Remember Black Panthers, a movement against racial discrimination in America? Well, study if there is a link between the two.**



Dalit Literature Growing

- Today, Dalit Literature, is synonymous with a literature of protest and has seen the rise of many stalwarts including:

Authors	Major Works
Urmila Pawar	Aidan (Weave), Kavanch, A Childhood Tale
Sharan Kumar Limbale	Akkarmashi, Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature
Arjun Dangle	Poisoned Bread, No Entry for the Sun
Om Prakash Valmiki	Joothan, Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryshastra
Meena Kandasamy	Ms. Militancy, Touch, The Gypsy Goddess
Bama	Karukku, Sangati
Gogu Shyamala	Father may be an elephant, and mother only a small basket, but...
G Kalyan Rao	Untouchable Spring

**Task for you: Read about these authors,
Include other authors you know that are not
mentioned here.**



Now, let's come to the essay...

- This essay by Muktibodh, translated by Anil Ragnath Kulkarni, included in *Poisoned Bread*, begins with the line “Dalit literature is the literature produced by Dalit **consciousness**”. (267) The last line is, “Dalit Literature is one which is produced out of a Dalit **vision**” (270).
- In the essay, we also encounter many similar-sounding words such as Dalit **sensibility**, Dalit **viewpoint**, Dalit **Point of View**, Dalit **insight**.
- As the original essay written in Marathi was translated into English, we run the risk of losing many of its subtler elements in case our exposure is limited only to the English text.
- **Task for you: Find out the meaning of each of the aforementioned words and see if they are interchangeable or connote specific meanings.**
- **Question for you: Do you think translation retains the content of the original message? Have you heard a phrase ‘lost in translation’?**



Objective nature of Dalit Literature

- According to Muktibodh, Dalit literature is objective in nature, not subjective. Its content is social, not individualistic. It is optimistic and revolutionary.
- Have you read any subjective text? The 19th century romantic poets were called subjective. Why? In case subjectivity refers to individualistic or personal experiences, objectivity refers to verifiable, empirical, and impersonal phenomena.
- **Okay, Dalit autobiographies form a major part of Dalit literature. How can one's autobiography be impersonal or objective?**
- According to Muktibodh, even though “pains and pleasures are lived and experienced by individuals alone, but the sufferings of the Dalit are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social” (267).
- What do you think is the aforementioned “common reason”? A straight forward answer can be ‘the framework of the varna system’ (267).



What is Dalit Consciousness

- You know that 'consciousness' is being conscious or aware of something within ourselves, and the external world.
- Being aware of the macro-level implications of caste system in Indian society as well as the micro-level impact it has on one's mind is Dalit Consciousness. Thus it comprises an introspection, i.e. is looking into how a person feels within, and looking out at the way society is organised.
- If a writer is aware of both these factors, and one's artistic work reflects both these worlds, then we may enlist that as a part of Dalit Literature.
- Can a non-Dalit writer look into the soul of a Dalit? Can the works of Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi and others who have written about Dalit lives, without being Dalits themselves, be considered part of Dalit Literature.
- Can a Dalit author, unaware of the macro-level arrangement of Caste system produce works of Dalit Literature? Can a romantic poem by a Dalit author be a part of Dalit Literature?
- These are questions pondered over by many scholars. Let's see if Muktibodh can help us here.



Dalit Viewpoint

- According to Muktibodh, a work of Dalit literature must be inspired by a Dalit viewpoint, i.e. looking at the world from the perspective one oppressed.
- Let's agree that viewpoint and point-of-view are synonymous. Muktibodh tells us that Dalit viewpoint is **necessary, but not sufficient** for a creative work to be called a product of Dalit Literature.
- He cites the example of a Marathi novel *Pan Lakshat Kon Ghet?* by Haribhau Apte. Even though the work is admirable for showcasing the suffering of women in a joint family, it lacks, according to Muktibodh, the artistic subtlety of Sharatchandra Chaterji. **You remember Chaterji, of course, as the author of *Devdas*.**
- Okay, in that case, a viewpoint may lead to “simplification of life to the extent that it helps to assert and prove the point proposed by the writer” (268). It will become too didactic, or propaganda.
- **Here comes the formalist criticism. What do they say. Lets read the next slide.**



Defence Against Formalist Criticism

- First of all, what is formalism? For brevity's sake, let's say that formalism is an idea that form (medium/technique/language) is more important than content. You can read [here](#) or see this [video](#) to learn more about formalism. You may also read essays by Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson and many others. According to this idea, a viewpoint will limit artistic creation.
- But, Muktibodh says no literature can be bereft of a viewpoint. Individualistic literature (theatre of absurd, existential literature, romantic literature etc.) is upheld for sophistication of form. However, this literature views only the interior of human mind, without a fair projection of the outside world.
- According to Muktibodh, human mind is led by two forces: a) the primitive and mysterious human passions within the mind, and b) the frightening destiny outside the mind.
- A good work of art could be faithful to both. In history, there are successful writers like Dickens, Tolstoy and Gorky, who upheld a point of view, yet produced great art.



Dalit Literature = Consciousness + Experience

- So our takeaway is that we cannot view the world without a point of view. Thus our perception, as human beings, will always be limited. We can't have a ubiquitous four-dimensional view of anything at one given time.
- If consciousness is mixture of a viewpoint of within and without, it should be sharpened by concrete experiences for a great work of art.
- That is the answer to the question, what is Dalit literature? It's a work that has the awareness (Dalit Consciousness) of the micro-level individual feelings (Dalit Insight) and macro-level social organisation (Dalit Vision) presented through **concrete experiences**.
- It will of course have an objective viewpoint, but along with an artistic finesse, that will ensure that the viewpoint is not a simplification of life, but a true portrayal of it.
- Muktibodh is hopeful that such a literary movement will penetrate the Indian way of life in the real sense.



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Primitive passions are indestructible; and destiny is unpredictable, cruel and resolute. It is the individual who struggles against it and is crushed in its tight grasp.

...Sharatchandra Muktibodh

