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**Understanding "Dalit": Perspectives from Indian Society and Dalit Writers through Translations - An Analytical Study**

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**Abstract**

Literature is a reflection of its times, encompassing people's experiences, joys, sorrows, thoughts, actions, and emotions. It also mirrors the society of which it is an integral part. Despite being composed of diverse sections, castes, creeds, and religions, societies share a common love for literature produced by writers from any background. The universal appeal and enduring value of literature contribute to its wide acceptance. Consequently, we recognize British, American, African, and Indian Literature.

Additionally, there are specialized genres like feminine literature and Dalit literature. Feminine literature focuses on works by women writers advocating for women's issues. Similarly, Dalit literature comprises works by Dalit writers, highlighting the experiences and struggles of Dalits. This paper explores the meaning of the term "Dalit," its perceptions within Indian society, and the perspectives of Dalit writers whose works are available in English.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Literature, Perspective, History, Caste, Untouchable, Subaltern,

**Introduction**

In the post-globalization era, human rights have become a central topic of ongoing debate among social scientists, scholars, philosophers, intellectuals, and politicians. When human rights are the focal point, literary works about socially backward, marginalized, downtrodden, and oppressed classes naturally gain significant attention. Recently, Dalit literature in India has emerged, highlighting the experiences of discrimination, violence, and poverty faced by Dalits. Historically, their experiences were often silenced and deemed non-literary and unfit for reading, often with social and religious sanction. However, various forms of Dalit literature, including poems, novels, short stories, biographies, and autobiographies, have now appeared, aiming to rectify this negative trend by showcasing the merits of Dalit culture.

The term "Dalit" literally means "oppressed" and is synonymous with "untouchable," referring to the casteless sections of India. It is also used as a self-

designation for a group traditionally regarded as untouchables. Dalits are a mixed population of various caste groups living throughout India, South Asia, and worldwide. Several different names have been used to define this group, such as "Ash Prash," meaning "untouchables," and "Harijans," meaning "children of God." Etymologically, the word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit word "Dalit," meaning "downtrodden," "suppressed," "crushed," or "broken to pieces." It was first used by Jyotirao Phule, a champion of backward and oppressed classes in Maharashtra in the 19th century, in the context of the oppression faced by the untouchable caste of the twice-born Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi used the term "Harijans," meaning the children of Hari or Vishnu, to identify them as children of God.

The chief Hindu scripture, "Manusmriti," describes the varna system of caste in Indian society based on occupation. It comprises five kinds of people born out of the body of Lord Vishnu. According to this mythological interpretation, Brahmins were born from the head, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the waist, and Shudras from the feet. Another section called Panchamas or avarnas, which includes Dalits, forms the fifth section of society under Varna Dharma.

Dalits were traditionally destined to undertake inferior activities such as leatherwork, butchering, and waste management. They worked as laborers, cleaning streets, latrines, and night soil. Engaging in these activities led to their being considered pollutants, and this perceived pollution was considered an epidemic. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated and forced to live on the outskirts of villages, banned from full participation in Hindu social life.

#### **Dalit movements:**

Dalit movements have been significant in India and abroad. They draw inspiration from leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. in America and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, whose sacrifices and contributions have inspired people worldwide.

One of the earliest Dalit reformers was Lord Gautama Buddha, who preached the abolition of untouchability. During the medieval period, the Bhakti Movement played a crucial role in the participation and emancipation of Dalits. Saints like Kabir, Mahanu Bhava, and the Varkari sect in Maharashtra condemned untouchability. They embraced Dalits as brothers, significantly contributing to the reformation of Dalits and their transformation from "untouchable" to "touchable" in Maharashtra, a critical state in this movement.

Prominent social reformers from Maharashtra include Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Rajashri Shahu Maharaj, V.R. Shinde, and Babasaheb Ambedkar. In 1950, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, converting thousands of Dalits to Buddhism, marking a significant step in the Dalit movement.

In West Bengal, Chaitanya Prabhu initiated the Namoi India Movement, which changed public attitudes towards Dalits. These reform movements in India have roots dating back to the time of Buddha and continue to evolve and gain momentum through various reformers and activists.

### **Dalit Literature in India:**

In recent times, Dalit literature has emerged as a distinct genre. Writers depict the tormenting experiences of Dalits to highlight their contemporary social, political, economic, educational, and mental conditions. This literature aims to present these realities to both Dalit and non-Dalit readers.

Mulk Raj Anand was a pioneering writer in this genre with his novels "Coolie" and "Untouchable" in English. These works have been translated into various regional and world languages. Dalit literature gained popularity in Marathi through Maharashtra Dalit poetry, which primarily seeks to raise awareness among Dalits about their social conditions and inform all conscious readers.

Dalit poetry is rich with expressions of the poets' violent and lashing experiences. Narayan Surve was one of the most prominent early Dalit poets, and he is known for his famous poem "Vidhya Rath." Other significant poets include Keshav Meshram with "Utkhasi" (meaning "Excavation"), Dayapawar with "Kondwade" (meaning "Subjugating Enclosure"), Namdeo Dhasal with "Golpitha" (meaning "The Red Light Zone"), and Tryambak Sapkal with "Surang" (meaning "Dynamite"). Contemporary Dalit poetry often serves as a revolt or protest against traditional oppression.

Dalit folk poetry also plays a crucial role in propagating Dalit sensibility. Notable Dalit folk poets include Woman Dade Kardak, Bheem Rao Kardak, and Vittol Uma. Their folk poetry, including ballads, has inspired the ordinary people of the Dalit community, fostering a sense of unity and resistance.

### **Dalit short stories**

Dalit writers have effectively used short stories and novels to convey Dalit sensibilities. These narratives capture the experiences and struggles of Dalits, providing a profound insight into their lives. Notable examples of Dalit short stories include "Fakira" and "Anna Bahu Sathi." Other significant works include "Davindi" by Shankar Rao Kharat and "Jerah Mi Jaat Charli Hoti" (meaning "When I Robbed a Caste"), which vividly depict the societal challenges faced by Dalits. These stories play a crucial role in highlighting the plight and resilience of Dalit communities.

### **Dalit Plays**

While drama is not as prominent as other genres of Dalit literature, some Dalit playwrights have significantly contributed to its development. Notable works in the Dalit drama include M.V. Chhries' "Yug Yatra," Gangadhar Pantawane's "Mruthyala Mask," Datta Bhagat's "Wata Oakwata," B.C. Shinde's "Udvast" (meaning "Destroyed"), and Ramnath Chavan's "Bamanwada" (meaning "Brahmin

Lane"). These plays are essential examples of Dalit literature, reflecting the social issues and experiences of the Dalit community through the medium of drama.

### **Dalit Novels:**

Mulk Raj Anand's novels "Untouchable" and "Coolie" are significant contributions to Dalit literature. "Untouchable" focuses on the evil of untouchability in India, depicting the experiences of an 18-year-old Dalit boy named Bakha over a single day in Bulandshahr. Bakha works diligently to keep the public latrines clean, exposing him to the contempt of caste Hindus and rendering him an untouchable. Anand expressed his sympathy for Dalits in India and wrote this novel to awaken the consciences of the upper castes.

"Coolie" is a longer novel that takes readers from a village to the famous hill resort of Simla. The protagonist, Munoo, a Dalit boy, undergoes a series of depressing and often disgusting experiences. Through Munoo's journey, Anand introduces readers to diverse segments of Indian society. The novel reflects the evils of selfishness, greed, and cruelty, with poverty being the root cause. Munoo's misfortunes in Bombay are a significant part of the novel, detailing life on the pavements or in the slums, the conditions in the prostitute quarters, communal disturbances, and labor troubles.

Bama is a prominent Dalit woman writer who has significantly contributed to Dalit literature. Her works, such as the novel "Karukku," explore her personal and professional life, highlighting her identity as a Dalit woman and the multiple structures of oppression faced by Dalits, particularly Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. In "Karukku," Bama depicts the life of a girl child in the Dalit community, who is seen as a source of cheap, unpaid labor. These girls often take on the responsibilities of a surrogate mother to their siblings, allowing their mothers to work outside the home. A Dalit girl's responsibilities include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding, washing, taking care of younger siblings, running errands, working in factories or farms, and handing over wages to a bullying brother or drunk father. This depiction presents an accurate profile of a Dalit girl child aged between 4 and 14.

### **Analysis and Discussion:**

The meaning and concept of "Dalit" have evolved over centuries across societies and nations. Historically, in Hindu scriptures, the term "Dalit" was synonymous with "Chandala," used to describe the lowest caste individuals. The interaction between Adi Shankaracharya and a Chandala highlighted the term, with Shankaracharya showing deep sympathy and treating the Chandala with kindness and respect.

In America, the Black Panthers, a social and political organization, fought for the equal rights of African Americans. This movement inspired Dalits in Maharashtra to start a similar organization called the Dalit Panthers. Other organizations, such as the Republican Party of India, the Indian Panthers Party, the

All India Scheduled Caste Federation, Mala Mahanadu, and the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi, followed suit, all aiming to champion the cause of Dalits. The works and speeches of great social reformers like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, B.R. Ambedkar, and Jyotirao Phule continue to inspire Dalits in the modern world.

The word "Dalit" has significantly changed its meaning, scope, and application. It no longer strictly means untouchable, Harijan, or downtrodden. In the present context, "Dalit" connotes any person subjected to exploitation, squalor, poverty, or discrimination in any form within society.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, the meaning of Dalit and Dalit literature conveys a collective message about the Dalit community rather than individual experiences. It speaks of their revolt against oppression, progress amidst adversity, and fight against regression. This message is conveyed to the world, highlighting Dalits' social, political, economic, and educational status. By focusing on the exploitative, desperate, and humiliated sections of society, Dalit literature shows how these groups continue to be suppressed and enslaved.

The experiences of a Dalit in India can be compared to those of a Dalit in Africa or America, as all face similar forms of mutation and discrimination. Dalit writers have consistently questioned religion and identity through their works. Dalit literature gained a strong foundation in the mid-20th century, with its framework established in the 19th century. Contemporary Dalit writers have built upon this foundation, developing a unique ideology and publishing various national and international journals, strengthening their literary presence.

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