

Rewriting the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature

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Abstract

Indian aesthetics are a philosophical and spiritual approach, as well as a form of art and literature. Aesthetics have a deep history of psychological and perceptual theory. In Indian aesthetics in particular, subjects such as of *rasa*, *chhand*, *dhavani*, and *alamkara* play an important role. Classical rules have always regulated Indian writing. For many artists, their approach to creation is 'art for the sake of art'. When specific forms and styles are imitated, the literature is thought to be adhering to those parameters that are thought to be essential for creative pleasure. This argument that long-accepted Indian aesthetics serves as a rule book for all types of literature is unsubstantiated. The proclamation of popular aesthetics as pan-Indian aesthetics is doomed to exclude marginalised creators and their works. Alternative aesthetics are required for Dalit literature due to the subject matter, which often regards oppression and survival. The creative indexes are not eliminated in the case of Dalit literature; rather, they are refused. As such, traditional aesthetics are insufficient in approaching Dalit literature. The purpose of this article is to examine how Dalit literature is understood, and the importance of alternative aesthetics, which are required to realise and appreciate Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Reality, Aesthetics, Tradition, Struggles, Challenges.

Introduction

For many years, scholars have taken for granted that literature falls within the purview of aesthetics. 'Aesthetics' is a psychological and perceptual theory. Traditionally and etymologically, the word 'aesthetics' is primarily associated with philosophy based on principles of beauty, especially in art. In Indian aesthetics, the idea of *rasa*, *chhand*, *dhavani*, and *alamkara* are pivotal. Historically, Indian aesthetics have largely consisted of Indian art evolved with an emphasis on inducing special spiritual or philosophical states in the audience, or with representing them symbolically. Classical rules have always regulated Indian writing. Indian aesthetics is a philosophical and spiritual viewpoint, as well as a form of art and literature. When specific

forms and styles are imitated, the literature is thought to be adhering to those parameters that are thought to be essential for creative pleasure.

For a very long time, Indian literature adhered to its conventional aesthetics, dwelling in sanitised concepts of beauty, art, emotion, and metaphoric appreciation. However, as the times evolved, modern literature departed from the well-established rules and parameters. The argument that long-accepted Indian aesthetics serves as a rule book for all types of literature is thus unsubstantiated. The proclamation of popular aesthetics as pan-India aesthetics is doomed to exclude marginalised creators and their works. Modern interpretations of classical Indian aesthetics are often concerned with topics such as spirituality and the natural world, as well as searches for 'truth'. In response to this, an alternative philosophy of Indian literary aesthetics has emerged, proclaiming that no matter how harsh, cruel and ruthless the truth is, it is beautiful and must be told in its real form. The concept of alternative aesthetics began to gain recognition when marginalised writers began to craft narratives about their experiences, with realism at the core.

Dalit literature in particular found its creative expression during this time, when such body of literature was being observed from the lens of alternative aesthetics. While the non-Dalit writers use 'art for the sake of art' as their motivation in their writings, the primal function of much of Dalit is drawing attention to Dalit consciousness and their continued marginalisation. Alternative aesthetics are required for Dalit literature since the writings are the true stories of agony and survival. The creative indexes are not eliminated in the case of Dalit literature; rather, they are refused. Dalit literature will never get justice through the traditional aesthetics. The purpose of this article is to examine how to understand Dalit literature and the importance of alternative aesthetics which are required to appreciate Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature and Its Purpose

Dalit literature consists of creative works written by Dalits, the lowest, 'untouchable' caste in India. The culture of this section of society has been disregarded for centuries, and hence their literature has spoken of a desire for democratic constitutional rights and powers. Despite Dalits constituting a major demographic of Indian civilization, their traditions, values, and issues have been purposefully left out of the great narrative of Indian history and civilization. Dalit literature has formed its niche in expressing this ostracism, though it has generally been omitted from the Indian literary canon due to

the very structural oppression it communicates. As Dalit writings can transform people, it is also referred to as revolutionary literature. Arjun Dangle summarises, “Dalit is the name of total revolution; it is revolution incarnate.”¹

The primary goal of composing this type of literature by Dalits is to reclaim their identity, express their suffering, and also to have the rest of the world to recognise their existence. Priyanka Kumari and Mandinder Kapoor discuss “Periyar, Buddha, Phule, Ambedkar, and the most important is the Dalit Panther movement, which was encouraged by the Black Panther movement and other western concepts focused on societal righteousness and mutual respect, which are essential for a perfect and democratic society, all of these affected Dalit writings.”² By reinventing the space of Dalits and their encounters in the contemporary era, this kind of literature developed a social, political, and cultural identity for this underprivileged community. Despite this, Dalit writers’ standpoints have never been viewed positively, and Indian society continually refuses to address issues surrounding the marginalisation of Dalits. All these features distinguish Dalit texts as distinct and discrete.

Dalit Literary Aesthetics

Dalit literary aesthetics direct the shape of Dalit literature. They rescue Dalit stories from oblivion and secure their public visibility through articulate assertion and interesting delivery. Often, their experiences are downplayed, disregarded, or misrepresented throughout major media channels, be it cinema, media, or classical literary works. Dalit literature works to assert their existence and impress it upon media depictions. Further, Dalit aesthetics force their audience to reassess their perception of Dalits by expressing their narratives in many genres and viewpoints. This introduces a completely new genre, one that is unfamiliar in the realm of literature but is based on true stories, bringing it closer to society. Here, the power system that has long

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¹ Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Mumbai: Orient Longman, 1994), pp. 122-123.

² Priyanka Kumari and Maninder Kapoor, ‘Understanding Dalit aesthetics: A critical perspective toward Dalit aesthetics’, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2021), pp.1-8.

been applied to all aspects of life is questioned. Dalit writing contributes significantly to the dismantling of hegemonic relationships in cultural, societal, financial, spiritual, and literary contexts. It allows its audience to view literature, history, and aesthetics from a completely new perspective. Alok Mukherjee, the translator of Sharan Kumar Limbale's "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature", elaborates:

Dalits are an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to, and questioning of, the theorizing about Indian politics, society, culture, and literature by intellectuals from upper caste Hindu and other dominant communities, and by non-Indians. To fail to pay attention to this challenge and questioning is to engage in a hegemonic discourse that excludes the realities and experiences of nearly a quarter of the country's people.³

The traditional "concept of 'Satyam', the truth, 'Shivam', the sacred, and 'Sundaram', the beautiful"⁴ are present in much of conventional Indian literature, but are noticeably absent in the majority of Dalit literature. Rather, it is concerned with questions such as birthright, reincarnation, and marginalisation. How may a person's birth in society be linked to earlier birth sins? Is it possible to consider the discriminations and atrocities perpetrated on humans because of their caste? What happens when knowledge is reserved for only those of society deemed beautiful? The primary motive of the aesthetics of Dalit literature is to promote equivalence, justice, and freedom for society's marginalised people. Only by comprehending all of these statements as the ethos of human rights can one comprehend Dalit literature.

The theme of non-Dalit writing inspiration is 'art for the sake of art.' Dalit aestheticism is defined as 'art for life.' The language utilized by Dalit writers is often devoid of the creative presentation, as traditional aesthetics often overlook marginalised issues. One methodology of writing cannot be used as a lawbook for the entire country. Each type of literary genre has its method of depiction, which may vary depending on the period in which it was written. Art is not static; it evolves along with society and civilization. With a diverse culture and heritage comes a distinct genre of literature, where people's perceptions may differ. G. M. Kulkarni states, "Even if the narrative

³ Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), pp. 145-162.

⁴ Kumari and Kapoor, 'Understanding Dalit aesthetics: A critical perspective toward Dalit aesthetics', p. 2.

in a Dalit text appears ordinary, it still has the undoubted capacity to convey pain to the readers.”⁵ Limbale also questions why literature that causes “exceptional agony” isn’t regarded as beautiful and accessible, but literature that causes “amazing pleasure” is. Form and skill are secondary needs to comprehend the meaning. True depictions of Dalit existence provide literary merit to Dalit literature, yet it is often rejected as “artless.”

To many classical authors such as N. S. Phadke, the lives and experiences of Dalits are not worth depiction in mainstream literature. He claimed that the types of situations and incidents required to ‘bring life’ to a novel are not present in the lives of Dalits. These authors feel that the central character of a novel should have a magnificent lifespan and experience, which cannot be obtained through Dalit’s stories. This elitism underpins a great deal of literary criticism, though progress has been made in recent years. The twenty-first century calls for justice and for recognition of the rights of all people. As such, the Dalit literary movement has seen a great deal of growth. Many authors, like Madhu Mangesh Karnik and Arun Sadhu, have published novels on Dalit life. Other genres, such as plays, short stories, poetry, and autobiographies, have expressed the the most underprivileged sector of Indian society. This provides solidarity to other Dalits as well as communicating their ongoing struggle for survival to the rest of the world.

Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Mahasweta Devi, T.S Pikkai, and Girish Karnad are examples of upper caste writers whose work has brought Dalit issues to the attention of the general public. However, these portrayals are often shallow, as they either exalt Dalit individuals by depicting them as heroes, or prioritise eliciting pity for them. They also often uphold the idea that their status is due to God’s will, or the consequence their Karma. The genuine story, which is the only one that can do fairness to the Dalit truth, is still absent. Their depiction of Dalit life frequently shifts from caste to materialism. Debjani Ganguly speaks on this in her work *Caste and Dalit Life Words*:

My attempt to read caste as discourse does not automatically connote a disavowal of the materiality of caste, a disavowal of how its imbrication in South Asian institutional structures affects the lived reality of the people. The pain of Dalits is palpable and embodied. I cannot presume to reduce it to a text or even to a series of texts, or even to discourse pure and simple. Its corporeal presence will forever cast an anguished shadow over anything one writes or has written,

⁵ G. M. Kulkarni, *Gramin Sahitya: Swarup ani Samasya*, trans. Anand Yadav (Pune: Mehta Publishing House, 1984), pp. 123-152.

about it. At the same time, it is also a pain that has long, complex, and overlapping histories, histories about which there is even today hardly any consensus, notwithstanding the tomes that have been devoted to their analysis.⁶

The Role of Autobiographies in Dalit Literature

For a variety of reasons, Dalit autobiographies cannot be compared to other, mainstream autobiographies. For many Dalits, writing an autobiography is like breaking a long-held silence. Regardless of material status, almost all Dalit memoirs reveal a sense of disarray, unfulfillment, and insecurity. The rise in the number of autobiographies on this genre reflects a refusal to remain a passive observer of regular humiliation. Only via Dalit autobiographies can one truly comprehend the oppressed class' mental, physical, and economic conditions, as well as their distinct culture.

In recent years, fiction in the shape of novels, plays, and short stories has provided an outlet for Dalit expression. They are, however, lesser in number. The aesthetics of a society's literature is also influenced by its tradition. The representation of Dalit characters in India's caste narrative is frequently related to myth. The dichotomous portrayal of Dalits and Adivasis as bad, and their counterparts as virtuous, necessitates the development of a new aesthetic. As a response to the depiction of the population as demonic, it is critical to deconstruct such myths. In popular literature, the portrayal of Karna and Eklavya as heroes who have endured a great deal of hardship is praised. These characters, on the other hand, are endowed with a specific Dalit awareness when they are reconstructed by a Dalit writer. Non-Dalit writing, according to Baburao Bagul, exhibits only fictional values and consciousness. This is why it is necessary to read and write Dalit literature from a Dalit perspective.

Most Dalit autobiographers emphasise the resistance exhibited by Dalit women characters and generally do not linger on aspects such as their demeanour or appearance. The struggles and strengths of Balbir Madhopuri and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's mothers in their respective autobiographies, *Against the Night: An Autobiography*⁷ and *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon*

⁶ Debjan Ganguly, *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2008), pp. 89-92.

⁷ Balbir Madhopuri, *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night: An Autobiography*, trans. Tripti Jain (New Delhi: Oxford Publication, 2010), pp. 152-163.

Par,⁸ are considered beautiful and inspiring, with almost no reference given to their appearance. On the contrary, non-Dalit writers describe Dalit women from diverse aesthetic sensibilities. For instance, in Munshi Premchand's *Godan*, the Dalit woman Selia is shown to be a chaste woman, embodying the power of *satitva*, which is a popular aspect of aesthetics in traditional Brahmin art.⁹ Mulk Raj Anand in his *Untouchable* describes the Dalit character Sohini as a desirable and attractive woman.¹⁰ Both novelists evoke the beauty of the women through a sensuous romantic description of their physical charms. Madhopuri and Bechain do not give any such description of a woman's bodily grace or loveliness, clearly underlining that their aesthetics and their significance are derived from their experiences of being discriminated against and even sexually assaulted. The autobiographies mark their protest of the objectification of women, Dalit women in particular, and are vehicles for the dissemination of Dalit consciousness.

Differentiation of Dalit Literature Aesthetics and its Criticism by Traditional Literary Critics

As a body of work associated with a marginalised group, Dalit literature has been the subject of a great deal of controversy. Bhimrao Kulkarni, a non-Dalit writer, criticizes Dalit authors for exaggerating their agony. He states that "the anger in Dalit literature is spurious and the grievances made by Dalit writers in their writings are excessive and fake."¹¹ Sharan Kumar Limbale disagrees with this appraisal and writes that opinions such as Kulkarni's seek to devalue Dalit protest. He states, "Ambedkar to substantiate that the protest in Dalit literature is a result of the persistent exploitation of Dalits."¹² Dalit literature has further been censured for lack of 'literariness' in their narratives. Balkrishna Kavthekar, Kusumavati Deshpande, and N. C. Fadke deprecate the writings of Dalits as lacking in literary merit. Dalit writers, on the other hand, posit that Dalit literature contains a distinct set of aesthetics which are only rejected because they do not align with the traditional aesthetics found in classical Indian literature. Limbale refutes this criticism

⁸ Sheoraj Singh Bechain, *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par [Carrying my Childhood on my Shoulders]* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2009), pp. 221-236.

⁹ Munshi Premchand, *Godan: A Novel of Peasant India*, trans. Jai Ratan and P. Lal (Mumbai: Jaico Publishers, 2010), pp. 89-92

¹⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 234-236.

¹¹ G. M Kulkarni, *Gramin Sahitya: Swarup ani Samasya*, trans. Anand Yadav (Pune: Mehta Publishing House, 1984), pp. 234-235.

¹² Kulkarni, *Gramin Sahitya*, p.244.

of Dalit literature by non-Dalit critics: “Dalit literature is not pleasure-giving literature. Consequently, the aesthetics of Dalit literature cannot be based on the principles of aesthetic literature that privileges pleasure derived from beauty.”¹³ He states that the beauty of Dalit literature lies in its rendering of reality. To him, the bases of aesthetics for Dalit literature are the principles of Dalit activists such as B. R. Ambedkar, and the beauty of Dalit literature lies in its capacity to arouse Dalit consciousness that aims at creating a just and egalitarian society.¹⁴ The ideals of Ambedkar, such as progression of Dalits, unity among Dalits, and Dalit dignity, are propagated by most Dalit writers.

Limbale further states in his interview, “*Hame Daya Nahi Adhikaar Chahiye*” [*We Want Rights, not Sympathy*]: “Should I express the atrocities perpetrated on my mother and sister artistically? My writings expose the duplicity done to me.”¹⁵ Here, Limbale lays down a three-fold definition of Dalit aesthetics. First, they propagate Ambedkarite thought and raise Dalit consciousness; second, they highlight social problems instead of seeking to entertain; and third, they advocate the values of equality, freedom, justice, solidarity, and actions thereof.¹⁶ Omprakash Valmiki in *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature)* concurs with Limbale that the basis of aesthetics in Dalit literature should be the ideals and teachings of activists such as Ambedkar. This concept of Dalit aesthetics can be understood in the light of the representation of Dalit women by Dalit and non-Dalit writers.

A major factor that distinguishes Dalit literature published by Dalits from that authored by non-Dalit authors, is the mode of expression. Certain emotions, such as rage, pity, nostalgia, and sorrow are characteristic of Dalit writers’ writings about Dalits. In purposeful violation of the *savarna* tradition, the language utilised is vulgar and biting, and it is urgently prompted by personal agony and rejection. The usage of the speaker’s original tongue lends sharpness to the voice. *Savarna* writers frequently portray these emotions inaccurately, which makes their portrayal difficult,

¹³ Omprakash Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra [The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature]* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Publishers, 2010), p. 67.

¹⁴ Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*, p.69.

¹⁵ Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra [The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature]*, ed. Omprakash Valmiki, trans. Ramnika Gupta (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2005), p. 168.

¹⁶ Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004), pp. 180-182.

insufficient, and harmful. “In creative works, such babysitting for other groups and classes is quite awkward,” Satyanarayana said of other communities writing on Dalits.¹⁷ Dalit tales are based on personal experience. As a result, their work is authentic and untainted and their vocabulary is harsh, raw, and unpolished, much like their everyday lives, which are marked by poverty, illiteracy, and brutality. They believe that mainstream writers’ sophisticated vocabulary and aestheticised depiction is dishonest to the reality of Dalit life. Many layers of Dalit life can only be revealed to readers through persons from the same group, and would otherwise go unexplored. When a Dalit writer writes, they are writing about more than just caste. They illustrate a wide range of topics, including culture, accent, slang, class, gender, area, and so on. The lack of ‘literary’ forms and structures is often questioned.

The Dalit approach is distinct in that it does not involve adhering to traditional literary aesthetics, instead opting for an alternative style that creates a genuine tone. The rejection of the Dalit language exemplifies society’s caste and class divisions. For middle- and upper-class educated individuals, the language becomes excessively unsophisticated, and even when they comprehend it, they are frequently upset by it. In her critical essay “Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature,” Laura Brueck emphasizes the need of paying attention to Dalit writing techniques. “It enables for a more careful examination of the interstices of Dalit activism, awareness, and literary expression,”¹⁸ She believes that the “choice of writing technique and language is not only natural but also deliberate, as it opposes the prevalent writing manner used by upper caste writers. They can speak truth to the power of the centre and assert their distinct identity” by using their local language, style of expression, and vocabulary.¹⁹ The majority of Dalit writers choose to write in the language they speak. Depending on the location in which they are produced, Dalit literature is available in a variety of languages and dialects. The English translation of Indian literature has not only made Dalit writings available throughout India, but it has also raised awareness of caste issues around the

¹⁷ Satyanarayana Kumar, ‘The Political and Aesthetic Significance of Contemporary Dalit Literature’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 54, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-16.

¹⁸ Laura Brueck and Christi A. Merrill, ‘Beyond Untouchability: Dalit Literature in Hindi’, *Rewriting Caste: Dalit Literature in Hindi*, 1 October (2018). At <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2018-10/october-2018-dalit-writing-beyond-untouchability-dalit-literature-in-hindi/>. Accessed 15/09/2022.

¹⁹ Brueck and Merrill, ‘Beyond Untouchability’, pp. 87-88.

world. K. Suneetha Rani discusses this in ‘Does Translation Empower a Dalit Text?’, explaining that Dalit literature is best “when a Dalit writer has communicated his or her experiences and feelings that stem from a deep sense of humiliation and shame.”²⁰ It is unavoidable that translation carries negative connotations, as the process has been known to distort the original meaning of texts. The way people describe themselves reflects their culture and their class, and translation frequently leads to misinterpretations. Here, there are two elements to consider with regard to Dalit writing. The method of translating has allowed us to cast doubt on India’s romanticised history, which has painted a dazzling picture of it as “a gold bird”. The existence of a parallel or alternate history has been overlooked in favour of upholding narratives that centre the upper castes. When translations became available, however, it became possible to have greater consideration of India through the eyes of the dominant and the submissive, making the society dialogical.

Many non-Dalit critics censor the language of Dalit literature due to its vulgarity. As mentioned above, vulgar language faithfully represents the language used by Dalits in their everyday experiences, and thus it would be disingenuous to omit it from depictions of their lives. In *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*, Valmiki argues that Dalit writers use such language in their writings to give a realistic description of the anguish of Dalits. He adds that the language of Dalit literature is the language of rejection and protest, which brings to life the age-long agony of Dalits.²¹ Valmiki further contends that non-Dalit critics do not comprehend the filth and squalor, the humiliation, and the dehumanisation that are an inseparable part of Dalit life. Therefore, by terming Dalit literature as vulgar they reveal their deep-seated prejudice against Dalits.²² It is noteworthy that the use of abusive language is seen in novels by non-Dalits as well. The caste itself becomes an abuse in Munshi Premchand’s *Godaan* and Gurdial Singh’s *The Last Flicker*. For instance, non-Dalit characters of Premchand and Gurdial Singh use caste-specific words to insult Dalits. In *Godaan*, Selia is often referred to dismissively as ‘Chamarin.’ Similarly, in *The Last Flicker*, Jagseer is addressed as ‘Oye low caste.’ *Untouchable* contains these as well as curses directed at Dalits. All the three above-mentioned novels employ abuses and

²⁰ Rani Suneetha, *Identities and Assertions: Dalit Women’s Narratives* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2007), pp. 134-145.

²¹ Om Prakash Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra [The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature]* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Publishers, 2001), pp. 123-124.

²² Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*, p.154.

curse as do the autobiographies; thus, they reinforce the idea that Dalit life cannot be fully represented by sanitising abuses and violence in the literature that seeks to depict it.

In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Pierre Macherey argues that a literary work may adopt a particular form for its present purpose. Further, “Macherey’s argument links aesthetics with ideology and proposes that aesthetic values in a text are often masks for very real social conditions. ‘Aesthetics’ in a text offers the images as real and as reflecting a general human condition. Yet what it conceals is a problematic situation where class conflict or unequal power relations exist.”²³ Raymond Williams also broaches the concept of aesthetics and finds power and aesthetics as inextricably interwoven. He explains that in the English poetry of the seventeenth century and eighteenth-century arts, the landscape becomes very significant. Landscapes with manor houses were considered ideal and aesthetically attractive. Williams observes that labourers, who constructed those manors, however, remained missing. Pramod K. Nayar further observes the problematic relationship between aesthetics and power:

Art, aestheticians such as Shaftesbury, Addison and Steele, Mark Akenside, Immanuel Kant and of course the English romantic writers argued, was about beauty not sweaty, tiring labour. Concepts of beauty and aesthetics theories themselves are, therefore, ideological because they support the dominant classes when they argue in favour of representations only of the upper classes.²⁴

The emphasis from intellectuals on the relationship between power and aesthetics palpably raises questions regarding the opinion that Dalit literature lacks literariness. Understandably, the powerful and the rich determine the standards of beauty in society. Nayar writes: “Aesthetics cannot be separated from their ideological function. Concepts of beauty and taste invariably mask questions of power- who decides what is beautiful? - and classes where particular forms and styles become established as standards.”²⁵ Dalits continue to grapple with caste-based discrimination where the power remains with the caste-Hindus. Hence, Dalit literature is assessed on the parameters by which the mainstream literature is judged. Omprakash Valmiki in his *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature)* observes: “The aesthetics of the mainstream

²³ P. Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 167.

²⁴ Pramod K. Nayar, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* (New Delhi: Pearson, 2018), pp. 123-124.

²⁵ Nayar, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, p. 156.

Hindi literature is based on the western aesthetics. This is why their parameters fail to evaluate Dalit literature. Sanskrit literature is based on a Brahmanical and feudalistic point of view. Similarly, the point of view of western literature is also capitalistic and feudalistic.”²⁶ He asserts that,

...before evaluating Dalit literature, the traditional critics must analyze the backgrounds of Indian social structure, varna system, caste-based biases, caste-struggle, feudalistic thought, Brahmanistic point of view, intra-society conflicts, and socio-economic Indian psychologies. They also need to understand Indian culture and politics. Only then, they can evaluate Dalit literature.²⁷

The ongoing discussion perspicuously highlights the disgruntlement of Dalit writers and critics with having been labelled as unliterary. The point of view of Dalit writers could be clearly understood within the framework of articulations like that of Laura Brueck and Christi A. Merrill:

Dalit writers use fiction, autobiography, and literary criticism to actively rethink constructions of caste, race, religion, and gender, constructions that extend backward in Indian history but that have all been distinctively refigured in the postcolonial political context and that continue to shape day-to-day social and political identities. In the process, they reshape the very literary genres and interpretive procedures used to evaluate those same literary texts.²⁸

The Dalit/Dalitist divide is carried to the further extreme when non-Dalit writers exclude Dalit literature from the ambit of literature itself because it lacks literary refinement. Rajendra Yadav writes that Hindi Dalit literature as it stands lacks literariness in terms of language, seriousness, maturity, and aesthetics. According to Yadav, Valmiki is the only Dalit Hindi writer who has literary merit. Dalit critics challenge the premise of Yadav’s criticism and argue for a distinct purpose and aesthetics for evaluating Dalit literature. They reason that its aesthetics is derived from its purpose of depicting the reality of Dalit life, of unifying, and of evoking Dalit consciousness. Bechain believes that the obscenity in Dalit language is borne of the experiences of Dalits. Dalit writers include expletives and obscenity in their writings to clearly describe their oppression.

Notable Dalit auto biographers agree that the framework to study the aesthetics of Dalit literature is to be found in Ambedkarite thought as it does not seek to arouse pleasure; besides that, it focuses on the importance of the suffering of Dalits and on raising Dalit consciousness. The Savarna critic

²⁶ Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*, p. 166.

²⁷ Valmiki, *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra*, p. 182.

²⁸ Brueck and Merrill, ‘Beyond Untouchability’.

Ramnika Gupta also makes a convincing case for Dalits themselves defining the parameters for their literature. In *Dalit Chetna: Sahitya [Dalit Consciousness: Literature]*, she writes that Savarna critics reject literature by Dalits as they find it weak in aesthetics and obscene in language. She subsequently asserts, however, that Dalit writers need not get a certificate of 'good writing' from them, and they should themselves set the parameters of their expression.²⁹ Further, the truthful description of filth as intrinsic to Dalit 'basties' by Dalit writers also substantiates the need for separate aesthetics of Dalit literature. As Valmiki describes the foulness of his *basti* vividly:

On the edges of the pond were the homes of the Chuhras. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, and even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit. . . . The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, and daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their minds.³⁰

Conclusion

The Dalit literary movement began as a cry for recognition and acknowledgement of their agonies and exploitation. Hence one must accept that accounts of this suffering is an inherent aspect of the genre. The goal of bringing the periphery to the centre drives the motive of writing Dalit literature, rather than the of creative enjoyment that drives many authors in higher castes. Its scope extends far beyond caste disparities and injustices that have been passed down through the generations. At its core, Dalit literature is based on realism. The *savarna* writers have always questioned Dalit literature's *shaundaryashastra* and the criteria through which it should be measured. They have a conversation about rituals and values, but they do not overlook the fact that Dalits have their own culture, which may differ from theirs due to differences in circumstances. Another issue that upper castes talk about is the lack of sociological benchmarks. When Dalit authors compose Dalit literature, they do so with a Dalit mindset. The writers' understanding of their own Dalit identity is referred to as Dalit

²⁹ Umesh Kumar, 'In Memorium: Ramnika Gupta (1930-2019)', *Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi)*, vol. 313, no. 5 (2019), pp. 11-18.

³⁰ Om Prakash Valmiki, *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*, trans. Mukherjee Arun Prabha (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 123-133.

consciousness. The goal of such literature is to raise awareness of the current terrible system, to educate people about the Dalit fight, and to inspire an upheaval through their literature. “The very act of writing is an act of resistance as they speak the truth that has been continuously ignored, challenged or silenced.”³¹

It may be concluded that Dalit literature can be analysed on the yardstick of its efficacy at evoking Dalit consciousness. Dalit literature is a part of the movement against the practice of tyranny and discrimination based on caste. Dalit writers highlight the nuances and intricacies of their lives. Their experiences are not expressed for amusement, but for justice. They are forced to grapple with penury, oppression, and hatred. They are hurled expletives at, insulted, and thwarted from making financial advancement. They are relegated to the status of objects of hatred and ubiquity. Thus, expressing such experiences poignantly and truthfully makes Dalit literature beautiful in itself. As John Keats said, “‘Beauty is truth, truth is beauty,’ - that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”³²

³¹ Raja Rao Dunna, ‘Dalit Aesthetics Versus Mainstream Aesthetics: A Comparative Perspective’, *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, no. 11 (2018), pp. 410- 413.

³² John Keats, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2003).