



# The Creative Launcher

An International & Refereed E-Journal in English

**DOI: [10.53032/tcl.2016.1.1.18](https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2016.1.1.18)**

## Dalit Aesthetic Theory

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### Abstract

Dalit Aesthetic Theory has similarities with the theories of subaltern literature, African American Literature as well as with problem play, and Drama of Ideas. Dalit Aesthetic Theory is indigenous and is firmly rooted in the history, politics and culture of Dalits. In Indian literature the use of untouchability as a theme is not new. Caste consciousness is a motif in the writings of 14<sup>th</sup> century saint-poet Chokhamela, a village Mahar, Kabir, Ravidas, Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, and Tagore. Prior to Ambedkar the untouchable writers accepted tacitly the tenets of Hindu religion and philosophy, namely, the theory of *Karma* and *Varnashramdharma*. But at the same time they regretted their miserable condition and despicable status in the society. Contemporary Dalit Literature is Ambedkarite Literature in which there is a portrayal of agonizing reality, and the expression of a radical revolt against the age old, time honoured defective traditions, conventions, and dogmas of Hindu religion. Dalit Literature cuts at the very roots of *Varnashramdharma*. According to Ambedkar the root cause of social and cultural exploitation of the Dalit lies in the disparaging laws pertaining to the status of the Dalit ordained in ancient Indian scriptures of Hindu religion and philosophy. Contemporary Dalit Literature portrays dreadful and humiliating events of Dalit world. It represents inequality, sorrow, and misery of the oppressed class. Dalit Literature tells us about the cultural conflict of the socially, economically, and culturally deprived and disadvantaged group of people. It requires literature to be revolutionary, didactic, and doctrinaire.

**Keywords:** Didactic, Dalit Literature, Doctrinaire, Aesthetics, Oppression, Conventions

With regard to the definition of Dalit Literature most of the Dalit writers and critics are of the view that Dalit Literature is not the literature of a particular caste. M. N. Wankhade defines Dalit in the following words, “The word “Dalit” does not refer only to Buddhists and



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backward class people, but also to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed. This definition is in accordance with that given by Babu Rao Bagul in the Dalit literary conference Mahad".<sup>1</sup>

Hence, Wankhade holds the view that Dalit Literature deals with the life of Dalits and also with the life of "all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed." This definition of Dalit Literature laid down at the Conference brings home to us that Dalit writers, unlike African American writers, are integrationists. Arjun Dangle, in his essay entitled "Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future," enumerates "general points regarding the role of Dalit literature and its literary value." In this connection he remarks that "Dalit literature is not separatist" and that "Dalit literature is not restricted only to Buddhists (i.e. the Mahars of yesteryear)."<sup>2</sup> For Dalit writers the literature which deals with the oppression of the Dalit due to the disparaging and thereby defective dogmas of Hindu religion defines Dalit Literature, irrespective of the fact whether the literature is written by a Dalit or by an upper caste writer. However, the word "Dalit" has become a synonym of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes because 90 per cent of the people of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes live below the poverty line, and that they have been the real victims of the disparaging dogmas of Hindu religion.

Arjun Dangle, while expressing his views on "New Connotations of the World 'Dalit'," observes:

When Dalit literature began to be talked about, a number of doubts were raised as to its nature... Initially the discussion centered around Buddhist (or Mahar) youths as they led the movement. Later on it realized that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers and intellectuals clearly stated that it was not the literature of a particular caste. Their stand from the beginning is broad-based and well-developed.

Let us now see what is Dalit literature and who are Dalit writers. Is Dalit literature the literature of those born in Dalit caste?

Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience joys and sorrows, and struggle of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.<sup>3</sup>

Arjun Dangle is not of the view that only Dalits can write Dalit Literature, because "experiences are not simply stated but their meaning is also explained." He observes:



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It is out of this realization that the Dalits consider works such as the poetry of Narayan Surve, *Ek Gav Ek Panavatha* by Baba Adhava or *Javha Manas Jago Hoto* by Godavari Parulekar as their own. They also feel one with the Samanter literary movement in Hindi. On the other hand the works of some Dalit writers are seen as being suffocated by white collar traditional values.

The difference between the works of the two kinds of writers is not just because of their castes but also due to differing experiences and their ways of interpreting them. Thus, though caste is at the root of most Dalit literature, as its literary manifestation is based on its experiences. The horizons of Dalit literature are expanding. But the non-Dalit writers do not like to call themselves Dalits....4

In his essay entitled “What is Dalit Literature?” Sharatchandra Muktibodh writes, “Dalit Literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness.” He further says:

The nature of Dalit consciousness is obviously not subjective. It is true that pains and pleasure are lived and experienced by individuals alone but the sufferings of the Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social.5

Muktibodh holds the view that “an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view.”6

Though none of the Dalit writers and critics has so far stated that only Dalits can write Dalit Literature, Eleanor Zelliot holds a contrary view when she says:

Those in the Dalit school would say: Yes, there is Dalit literature. Only Dalit can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes. And when educated and no longer poor, they not only remember their childhood, they also suffer from the idea of pollution which remains strong in the Hindu mind, and they identify with their village brothers and sisters who are still subject to outrageous treatment when they claim their full human rights.7

As Ambedkar was an integrationist, the above views voiced by Zelliot are not commensurate with either Ambedkar’s ideas or with the ideas of Dalit writers and critics. In his struggle against *Varnashramdharma* and disparaging laws of Hindu religion, Ambedkar’s staunch supporters were also caste Hindus, and Ambedkar gladly welcomed their support and participation for the cause. In June 1923, when Ambedkar began his career as a lawyer, many of his closest associates were caste Hindus with whom he had formed an inter-dining intellectual group. It was a Brahmin, G.N. Sahasrabude, who backed Ambedkar in burning the *Manusmriti* in 1927 as a reaction against Hindu orthodoxy of traditional caste restrictions.



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The problem of untouchability alone is not the primary concern of Dalit Literature. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Babashaheb Ambedkar were champions for the cause of the Dalit. But it is the literature influenced by Ambedkar's ideas instead of Gandhi's thoughts which defines Dalit Literature. Gandhi is said to have spoken and written more on untouchability than on any other subject. Ambedkar was recognized by many as the untouchable's chief spokesman. He was the moving spirit behind organizations, schools and colleges established for the oppressed people of Hindu society. Despite their common concern, Ambedkar and Gandhi were often at odds in their programmes for the cause of the Dalit. Though Gandhi was for the abolition of untouchability, he held the firm view that *varna* system must remain. According to Gandhi *varna* system was a divine institution hereditary occupation should be followed by all 8, but *jati* division should be abolished.<sup>9</sup> There should be no grading of high or low occupations. Every occupation is important, and there should be no ill-feeling among people following different occupations. Untouchability arose out of aberration of the *varna dharma*, for all men were born equal.<sup>10</sup> According to him temples, schools, colleges jobs must be open to untouchables. Gandhi says, "The laws of *varna* prescribes that a person should, for his living, follow the lawful occupation of his forefathers." "A scavenger has the same status as a Brahmin."<sup>11</sup> Ambedkar's goal stood in marked contrast to Gandhi's "Ideal Bhangi"<sup>12</sup> who would continue to do sanitation work and his status would be equal to that of a Brahmin. According to Ambedkar *Varnashramdharma* scheme is an unnatural and inhuman ordering of society. He views Gandhi's ideas of ennobling the scavenging profession as "an outrage and a cruel joke." According to Ambedkar, "Mr Gandhi's attitude is that let Swaraj perish if the cost of it is political freedom of the Untouchables."<sup>13</sup> Ambedkar sought to bring about equal social, political and economic opportunity for all.

Hence, a work of art may not be called a piece of Dalit Literature which is influenced by Gandhi's ideas in contraventions of Ambedkar's ideas. That literature is not Dalit Literature which only deals with the sufferings of Dalits and the problems of untouchability and yet upholds *Varnashramdharma* and caste system of Hindu religion. A Dalit work of art pleads for the annihilation of caste system and integration of Dalits in the main stream. However, because untouchability is the offspring of *Varnashramdharma*, it is difficult to assess whether a work of art is influenced by Gandhi's ideas or by the thoughts upheld by Ambedkar.

In Dalit Literature there is a message that Indian society has built a trap for the Dalit which creates intolerable tensions and frustrations. Hence, the first and foremost principle of Dalit Literature is that it is not designed to bridle the readers and the audience to concede to what pre-exists. Dalit Literature wants to stimulate the readers to transform his society. It



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debunks and decries some of the social norms of Hindu religion and philosophy. In Dalit Literature the characters represent conflicting ideas, and the conflict is between natural thinking and egalitarianism on one side and conventional rigidities on the other which sap the mankind and the soul of the society. Because Dalit Literature pooh-poohs some of the social norms of Hindu religion and philosophy, Dalit Literature smacks of blasphemy. The theory of *Chaturvarna* is repugnant to Buddha and also to the Dalit. According to the Dalit the composition of the society based on the pattern of *Chaturvarna* by dint of one's birth is arbitrary. Dalit Literature does not deal with tensions arising from the deviation from the norms and standards of the society, instead it condemns and castigates the norms of the society; it denounces the ills of caste system and the inefficacy of the laws of Hindu religion and philosophy which plague the Indian society. The real villains in Dalit Literature are the social institutions or the defective and disparaging dogmas of inequality of *Varnashramdharma*. Dalit Literature does not feel shy of condemning such defective norms of Hindu religion and philosophy as laid down in *Bhagwatgita*, *Bhuddhayan Dharma Sutra*, *Yogavashista*, *Manu Smriti*, and *Ramacharitmanasa*. In *Bhagwatagita*, Lord Krishna says:

मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः ।

स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथाषूद्रास्तेऽपि यांति परं गतिम् ॥ (Chapter IX Verse 32)

Oh Arjun! Being refuted in me even they who are of sinful origin as women, Vaishyas and Shudras also attain to the Supreme Goal. [English Translation]

Dalit writers reject the theory of “sinful origin” and that of Karma, i.e. because of the *Karmas* or deeds of our previous lives one is born a woman and the other a *Shudra* and so on. The concept as mentioned in the *Bhagwatgita* is in contravention of the principles of social justice. The preamble to the constitution of India assures all the citizens: Justice— social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression and belief; equality of status and opportunity, fraternity assuring the dignity of the individuals.

Likewise Dalit Literature challenges and denounces the values of Indian religion and philosophy which ordains that the offspring of *pratiloma* marriages are *Chandals*. In Hindu religion one finds two types of inter-*varna* marriages. One type of inter-*varna* marriage is known as *anuloma* (hypogamous) marriage, i.e. the marriage of a higher *varna* man with a lower *varna* woman, which is tolerated but not encouraged. But the other *pratiloma* (hypergamous) marriage i.e. the marriage of a lower *varna* man with a higher *varna* woman, is unequivocally condemned. According to Manu the offspring of hypergamous marriages are “outcaste” (चण्डालश्चधमो नृणाम्).<sup>14</sup> Similar views are expressed in some other ancient



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Indian scripture as *Budhayan Dharma Sutra* (I.9.6-14), *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (II.7), *Amarkosa* (II.10.4), and *Vasisthasmriti* (XVIII.1&XIII. 1-5).

Hence hypergamous marriage stands out as an important theme of Dalit Literature. Girish Karnad's Play, *Tale-Danda* (1993), deals with the problem of hypergamous marriage which is considered to be sacrilegious according to Hindu religion. The theme of *Tale-Danda* is the marriage of a Brahmin girl with an untouchable boy which spurted out violence and bloodshed in the city of Kalyan. In *Tale-Danda* the message is that howsoever virtuous the Dalit may be, the orthodox upper caste Hindus cannot bear the integration of the Dalit in the main stream of Hindu society. However, Rahul Katyaayan's play entitled *Singh Vijaya* (1991) offers a foil to *Tale-Danda*. *Singh Vijaya* dramatizes the Dalit protagonist's leap away from more basic Dalit concerns of survival and combating casteism. In this play, Ajay Prakash, the Dalit hero, overcomes his limitations and finally attains academic excellence and a high position of a lecturer in Physics at the University of Allahabad. He not only happily marries Richa, a Brahmin girl and his class-mate, but Richa's parents see in him a worthy son-in-law. Ajaya Prakash thinks that the way to the formation of such an ideal society could be found within our Indian cultural heritage through conversion to Buddhism. The play dramatizes the awakening and irresistibly forward movement of the present minority community of India.

African American Literature is primary segregationist, whereas Dalit Literature is primarily integrationist. Babu Rao Bagul observes:

Dalit Literature leads man to a just revolution. It teaches equality. Dalit Literature does not spread hatred among men but love.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, African American Literature is primarily ethnocentric, Dalit Literature is Ameliorative. Dalit Literature is antithetical; it decries the defective and disparaging dogmas of Hindu religion and philosophy. Whereas African American Literature is anti-apartheid. In African American Literature there is a manifestation of the Black's hatred for the white. In Imamu Aamiri Baraka's play *The Slave Walker Vessels*, the Black protagonist, arises as a new revolutionary hero, an "avenger", and a "righteous bomber" whose mission is to eliminate the white. Baraka's hero kills his white ex-wife and his children to free himself from all white taint. Baraka's conviction is that history develops through cycles of race-war. Baraka is the proponent of Black Arts Repertory/Theatre School which was founded in 1964, an event considered as the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. The principal commentators of Black Arts Movement are Amiri Baraka, Stephen E. Henderson, Larry Neal, Addison Gale, Jr and Houston A. Baker.



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It is interesting to note that though Gandhi upholds *varna* system of Hindu religion, in order to maintain the unity of the people of India he has no hesitation to recommend *pratiloma* (hypergamous) marriages which are sacrilegious to Hindu religion. Gandhi says:

If I had my way I would persuade all caste Hindu girls coming under my influence to select Harijan husbands. 16

Dalit Literature also disregards the ideals upheld by Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas*:

बरनाश्रम निज निज धरम निरतवेद पथ लोग ।

चलहिं सदा पावहिं सुखहिं नहिं भय सोक न रोग ॥

Devoted to duty each according to his own caste and stage of life, the people trod the path of the Vedas and enjoyed happiness. They knew no fear, nor sorrow nor disease.

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[English Translation]

Dalit Literature also pooh-poohs such ideals as spoken by Ram to Kabandha in *Ramcharitamansa*:

सापत ताडत परुष कहंता । बिप्र पूज्य असगावहिं संता ॥

पूजिअ बिप्र सील गुन हीना । सूद्र न गुन गन गयान प्रबीना ॥ A Brahmin, even though he curse you, beat you or speak harsh words to you, is still worthy of adoration: so declare the saints. A Brahmin must be respected, though lacking in amiability and virtue; not so a *Sudra*, though possessing a host of virtues and rich in knowledge. 18

[English Translation]

Dalit Literature despises the defective norms and dogmas of Hindu religion, and not men who deviate from them. The heroes of Dalit Literature attain their stature by transcending the defective norms of the society. Merely denouncing untouchability does not define Dalit Literature. Dalit Literature denounces irrational rationality of *Varnashramdharma* which fosters segregation, exploitation and suppression of a community or a group of people. In this respect Dalit Literature encompasses, as I have discussed earlier with reference to the opinions of M.N. Wankhede, Babu Rao Bagul and some other Dalit writers, the writings of non-Dalit writers as well. The intricate laws of Hindu religion in respect of Dalits have often been better understood analysed and exposed by such scholarly upper caste writers as Girish Karnad than by most of the Dalit writers. Hence, Karnad's play *Tale-Danda* is a Dalit play as well, because it provides an excellent critical understanding of the inefficacy of the laws of Hindu religion.



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Since Dalit Literature opposes exploitation and discrimination in the name of the ideals of *Varnashramdharma*, Dalit writers discard myths accepted by Hindu religion. Dalit writers cannot accept Rama as their ideal, because Rama killed Shambhuka, a Shudra who was practicing penance and also because Rama deserted Sita. Narada told Rama that the cause of the death of Brahman's son was an unauthorized practice of penance by a Shudra. Rama went round in Pushpaka, the arial celestial car of Kubera, in order to trace out the unrighteous Shudra and came across Shambhuka, practicing penance. Rama killed Shambhuka for which gods praised Him. Dalit writers view Rama as an oppressor who oppressed Sita, his wife, and persecuted the Shudra. Dalit writers despise the treatment meted out to Eklavya and insults heaped on Karna. M.N. Wankhede says:

There is an intimate relationship between literature and myth, and because the Dalit writer has rejected the non-Dalit literature, the absence of myths and traditions has created a vacuum in his writing. It is necessary to create new myths to fill this vacuum. Myths are a link between old and new literature and enable the new to merge easily with the stream of tradition.... "Dalit writers will have to find new heroes, their own Rama, Odysseus, and Krishana".<sup>19</sup>

Instead of Rama and Krishna the legendary heroes of Dalit Literature are Shambhuk, Eklavya, Ravidas, Jyoti Ba Phule, Bhim Rao Ambedkar and so on.

A Dalit work of art is a work of social awareness, and its purpose is to show the ways in which the society is moving, and how to hasten the transition. It is for this reason that many Dalit plays are Nukkar plays (street plays), which are meant to be staged in the neighbourhood where people are truly interested in changing the society. These Dalit plays show the images of social life to the workers who are interested in changing that social life, since they are its victims. Jyotiba Phule, the founder of Satya Shodhak Samaj in 1873, used ballads to disseminate ideas of social reform. Phule's followers continued to utilize ballads and Tamasha (Folk Theatre of Maharashtra) to preach the populace. Late in the 1930s through the 1940s, Tamasha troupes worked to bring before the people unorthodox ideas of Ambekar. Though Tamasha skits, farces, and dramas were originally unscripted, Kisan Phagu Bansode's play *Panchrangi Tamasha* (1932) is written in the form of *Tamasha*. The play dramatizes the hopes and aspirations of the Dalit and exposes the sham and hypocrisy of Hindu religion.

Dalit writers do not believe in the principle of art for art's sake. According to them art should not be divorced from life. M. N. Wankhede says:

Actually beauty is a relative concept. I don't believe it is a constant or eternal truth. The concept of beauty is related to the thought of each particular age. At one time



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kings were the subject of literature, common people were not acceptable subject. But today the life of untouchable quarters and slums has become subject matter of literature.<sup>20</sup>

Dalit Literature is against the observance of artistic rules imposed from without. In a Dalit narrative writing all the elements of the narrative writing – plot, character, dialogue are subordinated to the central thought or idea. Instead of good stories it is the ideas which govern the characters and situations. Action itself tends to become a thesis embodied. It may be argued that any kind of ideological commitment may be inimical to the production of a good work of art, and that there are not strong and great writers in Dalit Literature. But Dalit writers' emphatic contention is that art is only justified by its efficient service to life. J.S. Collins remarks:

The futility of Art for Art's sake controversy lies in the fact that whichever side you take you exclude from literature a long list of great names. Thus, if you say that literature should only be written for a moral purpose you exclude men like Shakespeare and Keats, and if you say that it should be written only for its own sake you exclude men like Swift and Bunyan.<sup>21</sup>

Dalit writers' repeated emphasis on content should not blind us to their infinite faith in artistic way of saying a thing. For Dalit writers art is a vehicle or an instrument to express their heretodox ideas. For them an art which is only beautiful, but not useful, is worthless.

Dalit theatre has similarities with the problem play and the drama of ideas. In a problem play the playwright deals with contemporary sociological problems and the focus is on the defective systems of the society. In a Dalit play the problem lies in the defective and yet age-old time honoured laws of Hindu religion and philosophy. The protagonists of Dalit Literature reject the old morality and develop or adopt a new realistic morality with a view to ameliorating the existing state of affairs in the society. The drama of ideas is a sub-type of the problem play. In the drama of ideas, theories and ideas are debated in a witty and humorous manner. In the drama of ideas the playwright deals with the subjects of world-wide interest affecting mankind everywhere. G.B. Shaw is a great champion of the Drama of ideas.

There are similarities between Dalit Aesthetic Theory and Marxist critical theory. Both the theories require literature to be revolutionary, didactic, and doctrinaire. Dalit Aesthetic theory diverges from Marxist critical theory by placing centrality on caste, and not on economic class. In this connection Arjun Dangle remarks:

Dr. Ambedkar was not a fierce opponent of Marxism. In the World Buddhist conference held in Kathmandu in November 1956, when speaking on 'Buddhism and Communism' he maintained that the two were similar. The only difference between



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the two was that while Marxism does not reject violence to achieve power; Buddhist philosophy emphasizes non-violence, mercy, love, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

A study of Dalit Literature as well as that of any other subaltern literature clearly demonstrates that literary theories have never predominated over the sociological analysis of Dalit texts or subaltern texts. Since the root cause of the Dalit's oppression lies in the outmoded dogmas of Hindu religion, a study of Dalit Literature is a very sensitive area. But we may expect to arise from this cultural conflict a harmoniously integrated society based on friendship and amity that has never existed before. All this may be a part of a larger travel towards a unification of the world. Some Africal American plays such as Richard Wesley's play *The Talented Tenth* and some Dalit plays such as Rahul Katyayan's play *Singh Vijaya* dramatize as to how to bring about a real and better relationship between man and man, so that he may live in peace, with some decency and not be constantly in conflict with his neighbour. These plays are epitomes of contemporary African American life and experience and Dalit life and experience respectively. In *Singh Vijaya*, Ajay Prakash, the Dalit hero, becomes a Buddhist. According to Buddha struggle always ends up with suffering and total devastation. The formation of a good society is possible only through co-operation and goodwill.

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