

## **Dalit Poetry: A Discourse Through Deconstruction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The relation between social movement and literature cannot be denied. Since time immemorial this relation has been continuing in almost all the literary traditions and there is no exception to the literatures in India. It is not an exaggeration if it is said that the literary movements in India have been travelling along with socio-political movements. Even a cursory reading of the history of Indian literature will establish this fact. It is also a known fact that the social movements are inspired by the thought systems of the great philosophers and social reformers. The thought systems offer an analysis of the context in which the writing and social change take place. The same system will also guide the literature to function as a tool of social critique through discourse. Social and literary movements explore the multiple systems of oppression and discrimination by incorporating both textual and sociological lenses. Not only sociology, even literature operates as a form of civic engagement by utilizing the heuristic tools evolved in philosophy and sociology and exposes the social inequalities or categorization of a caste, gender, race, and class. Creative writers or fiction writers will investigate the social issues so as to make the social situation to be understood by the common man. This understanding creates awareness about the existence and simultaneously leads them towards action to change their situation. Dalit Movement and Dalit Literature have been progressing in the same direction with same goals more vigorously. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to analyze the poetry written by the Dalit writers as a tool of discourse on Dalit Movement and on Dalits' life. The translated poems from the four South Indian languages have been selected for the analysis in order to emphasize the importance of socio-political context and the function of the literature.

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**Key Words:** *Deconstruction, Dalit, anguish, agony, Gender, caste, Socio-cultural, revolt.*

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Before going to look at the poetry written by the Dalit writers, an attempt is made to understand what is social construction and what is deconstruction. A definition of Social Construction as given by Donald E. Hall is, “Social constructionism as oppose to “Essentialism”, emphasizes that there are no trans-historical truths and no “essential’ underpinning to differences in gender, races and sexual orientation, etc. Differences and the values that are attached to them are socially constructed in that that results from traditions, religious beliefs, and conventions. Once that reflect who has held social power and the ability to influence our actions determine social definitions” (Hall;133). After a passage of centuries of time, it is understood that all the divisions, classes, genders, and races are created artificially, attaching the essentiality aspects to it, which lead to the oppression and exploitation. The victims of these divisions realized this fact and started their social construction again by voicing through different modes like revolutionary movements, voicing in literatures etc. The influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on these constructions played a dominant role in independent India and hence new political identity has been constructed by the Dalit writers in the contemporary Dalit writing.

“Deconstruction” is a term introduced by the philosopher Jaques Derrida. “Deconstruction is a philosophical or critical method which asserts that meanings, metaphysical constructs, and hierarchical oppositions and the analytic examination of something often to reveal its inadequacy.” This kind of analysis was started in the 1960s. Deconstruction in literature is all about questioning the already existing identities created by the non-Dalits for centuries together.

Dalit literature has emerged as one of the most important and distinct part of Indian literatures in recent times. Dalit literature is about the Dalits, the oppressed class under Indian caste system. The term “Dalit Literature”, “Dalit” meaning oppressed, broken and downtrodden—came into use officially in 1958, when the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit literature Society was held at Mumbai, a movement driven by Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit literature cannot be separated from the larger socio-political movements against the age-old systems untouchability and caste- based hierarchy and discrimination in India. Dalit movement began with the literary- activist collective, Dalit Panthers in the early 1970s. A few educated youth from the slums of Mumbai started the Dalit Panther Movement in June 1972 inspired by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar and the U.S. Black Panthers Movement. Though the Movement began in Maharashtra, the home State of Ambedkar, could inspire the entire nation within a short span of time and by 1980s it became a vehicle for the articulation of the

voices of the most oppressed classes. Parallel movements in the other parts of the country, including South India emerged and voiced out the same concerns. The social and literary movements in South India began to evaluate the society and culture in the light of the indigenous philosophies of Buddha, Mahatma Jyothir Rao Phule and Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. Dalit writers began to articulate their agony, suffering and their concerns in almost all the forms of literature ranging from autobiography to fiction and questioned the constructions of caste, gender, and religion. They tried to create their true identities by deconstructing themselves and this process of deconstruction is still going on and the Dalit identity has been firmly established through their discourses in literature.

The spread of the Dalit Panthers Movement from the North India, Maharashtra to Dalit Sanghrshan Samithi in the South India realized its goals of achieving their rights became possible only through discourses in different media and literature emerged as the most dominant medium among them. For instance, the following poem speaks volumes about the Dalit life;

### **BLACK DANCE**

You cherumi women  
Setting out, sickles  
Tucked into girdles  
To gather  
Leaves of thakara,  
Colocasia stems,  
Tamarind and vines  
Millet and rice,  
Wild roots and tender shoots,  
Cycas fruit and fish,  
Return tripping in fury  
Possessed by Kali.

You black cubs,  
Who gave the black soil its colour,  
Black panthers, red panthers,  
Lion cubs,  
Take up the saw of Valan,  
The lance of Velan  
The death noose of Kalan,  
Approach in the stride of Matan.

Cheruman,  
Hurled into the mud  
As manure for the soil,

Tinging the river red with your blood,  
Crushed and kneaded  
As glue for the bund  
And paste for the chamber wall,  
Wet land and dry land.  
Severed heads of pulayas  
Dripping blood  
Stride high across  
The looming sky  
With flags and claws  
And dangling tongues.

Raising the hill  
Lifting the mound  
Plucking out the palm tree  
Muddying the river  
Storming the water  
Shaking the jungle  
Brandishing the plough  
Black skins shout:  
'We shall take revenge,  
We shall take revenge.  
Eye for an eye.  
Tooth for a tooth.'

We, the poor, fed our deities:  
Kali, Pothi, Thevan and Muthen.

Slashing the rooster's throat,  
We offered them blood.  
Now we are fodder for death.

We will gash your bosoms,  
Breach your fortresses.  
We shall take revenge.

Making the forest move,  
Shaking fists calloused  
Picking thodaliweeds,  
The array of black souls  
Your granaries spat out  
Shout:  
'We shall take revenge  
Blood for blood.'

I will lay waste  
Your forts and your turrets,  
Manors and temples.  
Offending napes will be slit  
And blood split as sacrifice.  
Our beautiful girls were stripped,  
Flayed and ravaged.  
You expelled us from our homes.  
Gutted them and planted  
Thali creepers over their basements.

As yet there is land and women,  
As yet there is mother and child.

We shall take revenge.  
Blood for blood.

Time opened its eyes  
To see them dancing , possessed,  
Spilling the full measure,  
Emptying the granary,  
Swiping at hanging lamps,  
Desecrating ceremonial robes,  
Silks and sacred jewellery.

The slave laughed,  
The master shuddered.  
The heart of Kannaki flushed  
With laughter and the flames of revenge.

The holy blood of holy men,  
Shed with the swords they wielded,  
Flowed at the sacred gates.  
Kali grew furious,  
Sprinkling blood all around.  
Their hearts pacified,  
The dark ones broke into dance.

Let severed hands rise up in revolt;  
Let tongues cut off turn  
Into tongues of flames;  
Let the oppressed masses rise up  
And settle the score.

KKS Das, very well known as one of the influential writers of early Dalit literature, comes out with a revolutionary zeal in this poem Black Dance in which he motivates the oppressed communities to become conscious about their predicament and fight against the oppressors. In this poem, the poet urges the Cherumis, a subaltern class of people, to give up their slavish labour at the landlord's fields and insist on them to make use of their tools to fight against the oppressors. He kindles their sense of pride in themselves as they are the force that moves the land, and prepares it for farming. He also indicates the strength of the lower castes as they are involved in the manual labour and offers a nuanced description of the physical labour that these communities do and portrays the injustice they are rewarded with. He gives vent to the agonies of the community informing the atrocities committed by the lords on the hapless workers and the endless toil of them though they are kept hungry on most of the days of the year. The poet makes the clarion call to all the lower castes to fight against oppression. He is

aware that any encounter with the upper castes needs ideological strength and he excavates the buried gods and goddesses of the dalits and invokes those powers of destruction to enter into a dance of destruction. Here the poet unveils cultural memory of the community and connects the bound labourers to their own collective memory and prompts them to act. He lists forgotten gods and weapons of the underdogs such as Kali, Valan, Kalan, Velan, Matan and weapons such as saw, lance death nose etc. He resists the efforts of the Savarna castes to brahminise local gods and goddesses and appropriate them into the fold of brahminic value system.

Enraged at the legitimate violence of casteism in India, the poet sings of taking violent revenge. Though it is very distressing to accept the violent rage in the poem, the poet is unambiguous to seek for bloody revenge as he asks for “We shall take revenge/eye for an eye/Tooth for a tooth” All the gods he has invoked are gods of destruction, and they need to be propitiated by animal sacrifice. His outburst is a result of the centuries old ruthless suppression of the slaves and the denial of human justice. Now, they are freed from the bondage by the gods of destruction that they are dancing to lay waste the ivory towers of the lords. He will definitely find it a reversal of the situation and believes in ‘setting the score’. It is also important that the writer has identified with others such as Kannaki who have been denied of justice. Then poem concludes with note of revenge and hope “Let tongues cut off turn/ into tongues of flames; /Let the oppressed masses rise up/and settle the score”

As Raj Gautham, one of the leading Tamil Dalit thinkers, observes, ‘annihilation of caste is possible only when dalit culture becomes a protest culture and it must spring from the cultural roots of the community’. Das also forges a new idiom for dalit literature as he has challenged the domination of the upper castes and encourages the oppressed to take up arms by unearthing their own cultural resources. Liberation is possible when communities involved in fighting maintain their own cultural identity and place the struggles within their cultural memory.

In the same manner many other poets instilled the revolutionary zeal in the people to fight against the social evils. One among them is Siddalingaiah, a renowned Dalit poet in Kannada. Here is a poem written by him;

**The Dalits Are Here**

Hand over the reins, let them rule,

The Dalits are coming , step aside---

Minds burning with countless dreams  
Slogans like thunder and lightning  
In the language of earthquakes,  
Here comes the dalit procession,  
Writing (History) with their feet.

Into the dump go gods and gurus,  
Down the drain go law-makers  
On a path they struck for themselves.  
March the Dalits in procession,  
Burning torches in their hands,  
Sparks of revolution in their eyes  
Exploding like balls of fire.

For the thorn bushes of caste and religion,  
They were as the thorns in the side.  
They became the sky that looked down at  
The seven seas that swallowed them.

Since Rama's time and Krishna's time  
Unto the time of Gandhis,  
They had bowed low with folded hands.  
Now they have risen in struggle.

It grows, it breaks out of its shell  
The endless Dalit procession.  
Bullet for bullet, blood for blood,  
Shoulder to shoulder, lies bound together.

Under the flag of Dalit India  
Stood the farmers and workers.  
Flowers bloom in every forest,  
Thousands of birds take flight,  
The eastern sky turned red,  
Morning broke for the poor.

The Dalits are coming, step aside!  
The Dalits have come, give it up!

This poem, stands as a testimony for a discourse on the caste politics of India. There is an open criticism about the discrimination meted out by the Dalits in the name of professions lead by them for centuries together, from the time of Rama to the time of Gandhi. This poem surely conveys the need and the arrival of the Dalits as enlightened people who crossed the boundaries of oppression and marginalization and marching ahead through realization of the self towards assertion and authority. He means to say that the Dalits are no more silenced and weak. They are taking the procession to declare their power and are ready to fight, "bullet for bullet, blood for blood". Through this poem, the poet gives the hint that the Dalits are going to write the history with their revolution and the others must create space by moving aside. Certainly, the tone of the poem will inspire all the subjugated people to recoup their lost energies and create their true identities by wiping out the artificial identities created by the upper caste in the history.

Motivated by the Dalit poets and Dalit Movement many women writers came forward and started writing about their plight in their poetry. A considerable number of Dalit women poets have established their voices in Dalit literature in all South Indian languages. An Untitled poem here speaks about one such poet Sukeertharani, in Tamil.

**An Untitled Poem**

As they skinned a dead cow  
I stood guard,  
Chasing the crows away.

The leftover rice  
Gathered as alms  
From sundry village homes  
After long waits  
Turned piping hot in  
My bragging.

Seeing my father  
Down the street  
With a tell-tale drum  
Slung around the neck,  
I passed quickly

Face averted.  
Unable to state in the classroom  
My father's vocation  
Or his annual pay,  
I fell victim  
To the teacher's cane.

Sitting friendless  
In the back row,  
I broke down and cried,  
The world's gaze.

But now,  
Should anyone happen to ask,  
I tell them readily:  
Yes, I am a pariah girl...

In this poem, Sukirtharani, portrays the anguish of the Dalit lives. In her own words, "The other children would not share our food, but they wanted us to eat theirs. The uneasiness of being "SC" students never left us." (*No Alphabet in Sight*) She ardently transforms her pain into the verbal medium. The poem is clearly a discourse on the anguished lives of Dalits who have been discriminated based on caste. The poem captures the cultural and socio-political aspects of the Indian caste system. She gives voice to the pain of many other Dalit kids who underwent a lot of humiliation and insults in the educational institutes and the indifferent attitude of the teachers towards Dalit children. Through this we can understand that even the educational institutions are not exceptional in promoting the untouchability and discrimination. The speaker of the poem undergoes a lot of turmoil in expressing the facts that she could not understand the cultural aspects constructed in defining the lives of the Dalits as drum beaters, cow eaters and to be the subjugated and the amount of aversion showed by the teachers who are supposed to instill humanistic values in the students. There is no scope of expecting a better treatment from the other students when a teacher behaves indifferently and the fate of the speaker is to sit alone without any friendship which leads to alienation. But there is a shift from subjugation to assertion of a Dalit identity in the last part of the poem when the speaker says, "But now, Should anyone happen to ask, I tell them readily: Yes, I am a pariah girl...". This kind of a shift from the fears of artificial constructions

was possible only because of the exposure to the revolutionary movements lead by the people to realize their rights and true identities.

The women writers also got inspired and started writing about their place in the society as the ones who under go a double oppression for being born as a female and for being born as a dalit. Challapalli Swarupa Rani is one among the notable Dalit women writers in Telugu who ardently portrays the dalit life in her poetry. Here is a poem by her titled “MankenaPuvvu”.

**MankenaPuvvu**

I am a Kingfisher  
Suffering agonies  
In an entangled thorny bush  
If I stir any side  
It's me that the thorns prick.  
These thorns are not of today.  
They are shackles placed around me  
For generations together...  
Permanently caught between  
The well and the pit  
I am always haunted by danger.  
Let me ask, when have I lived  
My life myself...?  
  
At home male ego has slapped  
Me on one cheek while  
In the street caste supremacy  
Has slapped me on the other.  
For daily wages  
When I went to the fields,  
When the master there blinded by lust  
Waited in ambush to  
Exploit even me along with my sweat,  
I wanted to sow myself burying  
Me in the earth.  
Deprived of education for  
Years together,  
I walked into the lap of a hostel.

There too unable to withstand  
The hungry looks of the warden,  
I felt like holding my body  
In my fist and flinging it away.  
When they said in my childhood  
That I had no 'bindi' and  
On growing up when they said  
I had no caste,  
I felt like clamping my nose tightly  
At the stinking village.  
When I useable for sex  
Was not useable for living with,  
I felt like hiding myself  
In some gutter.  
Fighting hard against all these insults  
When I learnt the alphabet  
And got a job,  
To bear the whispers “reservation  
category”?  
I felt like plugging my ears with lead.  
When patience dies  
Even a blade of grass  
Can poke like a needle.  
I have no patience to run any more,  
I would wash my life in the  
Flames of these hardships  
And bloom like a mankenapuvvu.  
I will run past all the  
Adverse jungles like a stream.

The poem is a discourse on the plight of Dalit women and their predicament in the caste-based society. Swarupa Rani traces out the oppression of a woman in every phase of her life. She says that her life is not under her control as she has been controlled by the others. She is slapped by the male ego at home for being a female gender and slapped by the caste discrimination in the society. She becomes the victim of venomous desires of the landlord in the fields where she goes to work for livelihood. Here, the poet also points out the sexual



exploitation of Dalit women by saying that she is eligible for having sex but not for living with. Even after becoming an independent woman by acquiring education and secures a job she is not free from the insults as she has been identified under a reservation category and she dies many times while undergoing many insults at every point of life. Finally, she realizes that she is no more ready to take the insults and ready to revolt and fight against all the oppressors to bloom like a mankenapuvvu, the red flower, by crossing all the streams of exploitation and emerge as an individual with dignity and self-confidence. This kind of a change is possible only through the assertion and by shattering all the false identities created for the selfish motives of the exploiters. “mankenapuvvu” is a red flower found in the forests and fields. Here it is used as a symbol for revolution in the poem by Swarupa Rani. She urges that every individual should be like this red flower which blooms on its own by following the nature amidst the thorns and streams but never fails to bloom.

All the above poems are clearly seen as discourses on the prevailing condition of Dalits and proclaim the need for a revolutionary change in the society.

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