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Dalit Aesthetics as Dalit Discourse: A Scholarly Reflection

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of Dalit aesthetics as a distinct and radical discourse within Indian literature, foregrounding its resistance to classical Brahmanical aesthetic values and its commitment to lived experience, political consciousness, and human dignity. Drawing on the works of Sharankumar Limbale, Baburao Bagul, K. Satyanarayana, and other key thinkers, the article argues that Dalit literature is not merely expressive but assertive—challenging hegemonic norms of beauty, authorship, and representation. Through close readings of texts by Namdeo Dhasal, Bama, Gogu Shyamala, and S. Joseph, the essay demonstrates how Dalit writers deploy realism, orality, and linguistic defiance to articulate caste trauma and social critique. It also considers the implications of Dalit aesthetics in global, feminist, and pedagogical contexts, asserting that this body of work compels a rethinking of literary value, critical frameworks, and ethical reading practices. Ultimately, the paper positions Dalit literature not as a marginal subset but as a central force in redefining the aesthetic and political purpose of literature in modern India.

Keywords: Dalit aesthetics, caste literature, resistance, Ambedkarite discourse, subaltern narratives, literary humanism.

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Dalit Aesthetics as Dalit Discourse: A Scholarly Reflection

Dalit literature, emerging as an aesthetic and political force, is not merely a subset of Indian writing—it is a radical departure from traditional literary canons, an insurgent discourse rooted in lived experience. The aesthetics of Dalit literature is neither decorative nor ornamental; it is disruptive, emotive, and deeply ethical. As Sharankumar Limbale insists, Dalit aesthetics rests on "the artist's social commitment," "life-affirming values," and a consciousness-raising of "fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity" (Limbāḷe and Mukherjee 106–07). This is not a passive literature of suffering but a militant literature of assertion, aimed at undermining centuries of caste-based marginalization and cultural suppression.

At the heart of Dalit discourse is its challenge to classical aesthetic values derived from Brahmanic texts like Bharata's *Natyashastra* and the *Manusmriti*, which explicitly exclude Shudras—and by extension Dalits—from access to knowledge, art, and salvation. These aesthetic paradigms, built on a rigid hierarchy of varna, construct a literary and performative canon that is exclusionary at its core. Brijesh Kumar articulates this exclusion as not merely accidental but ideological, arguing that "most of the books written on the above formula are religious; they can't represent the whole of the Indian society" (Kumar, *Dalit Aesthetics* 87). Indeed, the very grammar of classical Indian aesthetics is incompatible with the lived experiences of the oppressed castes, making Dalit literature not merely oppositional but necessary.

This necessity births a radical aesthetic realignment. Dalit literature actively rejects the trinity of *Satyam* (truth), *Shivam* (goodness), and *Sundaram* (beauty) as defined by the upper-caste elite. Instead, it reinterprets these concepts through a humanist lens: "Human beings are first and foremost human—this is the Satyam; the liberation of human beings is Shivam; the humanity of human beings is Sundaram" (91). In this reformulation, Dalit aesthetics becomes a project of rehumanization, a dismantling of centuries of epistemic violence.

The radical reframing of truth and beauty is not a mere philosophical abstraction but a political act. Dalit literature reclaims the category of the human from the casteist narrative that dehumanizes. Gangadhar Pantawane's assertion that "Dalit is not a caste. He is the man exploited by the social and economic tradition of this country" (Kumar, *Dalit Literature* 89) redefines identity itself. This vision of the Dalit as a symbol of revolution, rather than a passive recipient of sympathy, transforms Dalit literature into a literature of praxis. It becomes a site of resistance, both symbolic and material.

A crucial debate within Dalit discourse concerns whether Dalit literature should have its own distinct aesthetics or be integrated into the broader Indian literary framework. D. R. Nagaraj, for instance, argues that Dalit literature should be located within India's civilizational continuum, drawing from its rich folk and oral traditions. However, critics such as K. Satyanarayana have contested this integrationist view, asserting that it neutralizes the disruptive energy of Dalit literature. As Satyanarayana writes, Nagaraj's approach "minimizes the revolutionary potential of Dalit writing" by framing it as a "civilizational contribution," rather than a rupture ("Political and Aesthetic Significance" 10). This tension between assimilation and assertion lies at the core of aesthetic debates in Dalit literary criticism.

Baburao Bagul, one of the foundational figures in Dalit writing, offers a sharp counterpoint to the integrationist view. He insists that Dalit literature is not rooted in Sanskritic tradition but in a lineage that includes the Buddha, Christ, Phule, Ambedkar, and the Enlightenment. In Bagul's view, "Dalit literature is but Human Literature," rejecting caste as the foundation of literary value. This view marks Dalit literature as inherently modern, secular, and emancipatory, challenging both religious orthodoxy and cultural nationalism.

The shift from caste to humanism as a literary paradigm also alters the function of art itself. Dalit aesthetics rejects the classical ideal of *rasa*—aesthetic pleasure—as its organizing principle. Instead, it foregrounds pain, protest, and political agency. Priyanka Kumari's observation that "How can pain be read for the purpose of pleasure?" highlights the irreconcilability of Dalit texts with traditional aesthetic criteria (Research Scholar et al. 1–2). Art, in this context, ceases to be an escape and becomes confrontation.

This reorientation has profound implications for literary form and content. Dalit literature does not merely document oppression; it embodies resistance. The rejection of "art for art's sake" in favor of "art for life's sake" is a hallmark of this tradition. Dalit texts seek not to soothe but to sear. They ask the reader to witness, not consume. They mobilize language as a weapon, not an ornament.

The politics of representation is another central axis of Dalit aesthetics. As Brijesh Kumar emphasizes, the question of who tells the story is as crucial as what is told. Non-Dalit authors, despite good intentions, often falter in authentically capturing the caste experience. Their depictions risk being voyeuristic or reductive. Tarachand Khandekar's phrase, "letters of their own blood," underscores the embodied, existential nature of Dalit writing (qtd. in Research Scholar et al. 5). These are not fictionalized accounts but testimonies, often written at great personal cost.

Dalit authors such as Namdeo Dhasal, Bama, and Gogu Shyamala have developed unique stylistic and narrative devices to render caste trauma visible. Dhasal's gritty poetry evokes the rawness of Mumbai's underbelly, particularly Kamathipura, not to romanticize poverty but to indict systemic injustice. His linguistic choices—vulgar, visceral, and violent—are a deliberate affront to the sanitized norms of Savarna literature. Laura Brueck terms this defiance a "rejection of the hegemonic yardsticks that have long dictated what is 'literary'" (Brueck). Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* and Shyamala's short stories are rich in symbolism and oral narrative structures, drawing from subaltern traditions while articulating modern discontent.

Realism, especially of the visceral kind, becomes a formal hallmark of Dalit aesthetics. But this is not the gentle realism of nineteenth-century bourgeois fiction. It is an abrasive realism that shatters illusion and demands accountability. In S. Joseph's "Identity Card," a government-issued scholarship card becomes the site of rupture in a budding relationship, revealing how caste intrudes upon even the most intimate aspects of life. In Gogu Shyamala's *Raw Wound*, the jogini system—a form of ritual sexual exploitation—is not merely described but indicted, turned into a metaphor for systemic caste-patriarchy (Satyanarayana and Tharu 15–17).

This form of realism serves as both revelation and accusation. It exposes the violence hidden beneath the surface of cultural harmony and national unity. It also performs what Satyanarayana and Tharu term a "defamiliarization" of society—a process of making the ordinary strange in order to reveal its brutality (15). In this regard, Dalit literature functions not only as art but as social critique.

The growing body of Dalit literature also invites an interrogation of the politics of language. Dalit writers often compose in regional languages or dialects—Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, Hindi—not just for accessibility, but as a political choice to resist the linguistic hegemony of English and Sanskrit. Language itself becomes a site of struggle. As Brueck notes, the linguistic coarseness or unpolished texture of many Dalit texts is not evidence of a lack of refinement but a conscious break from Savarna aesthetics. It is a way of reclaiming idioms, metaphors, and speech-acts from the margins.

This linguistic insurgency resonates powerfully in Namdeo Dhasal's Marathi poetry, which refuses euphemism and embraces profanity as a rhetorical tool. Similarly, Bama's choice

to write in Tamil, specifically in a Dalit Christian idiom, defies both Hindu orthodoxy and postcolonial English elitism. Gogu Shyamala's Telugu narratives re-inscribe oral traditions into the literary form, making a powerful case for storytelling as community preservation and resistance.

Such aesthetic strategies are particularly significant in the context of globalization and the commodification of culture. As Dalit literature enters global academic and publishing circuits, there is a risk of its radical message being domesticated or tokenized. The translation of Dalit texts into English, while expanding readership, also raises concerns about loss of nuance, idiomatic power, and cultural specificity. The challenge, then, is to ensure that the core of Dalit aesthetics—its rootedness in lived caste experience and its uncompromising demand for justice—is not diluted in the process of global dissemination.

In this light, Dalit literature must be seen not only as a national but also as a transnational discourse. Its emphasis on human dignity, anti-hierarchical values, and embodied suffering connects it to other movements of oppressed peoples across the world—African American literature, Indigenous writing, feminist struggles, and postcolonial resistance. This comparative framework does not dilute the specificity of the Dalit experience but rather places it in a global genealogy of defiance.

Moreover, Dalit literature disrupts not only the aesthetic values of the upper caste but also the structural norms of modernity and nationalism. The post-independence Indian nation-state, built on the ideals of secularism, democracy, and development, often subsumed caste under the broader rubric of class or regional inequality. Dalit writers, however, insist that caste is neither residual nor peripheral but central to India's modern identity. They expose how modern institutions—schools, courts, the police—reproduce caste hierarchies even while claiming neutrality. In this sense, Dalit literature performs what Gramsci might call a "war of position": it engages with modernity from below, not rejecting it wholesale but insisting on its radical democratization.

This counter-hegemonic function is particularly evident in the figure of the *Ambedkarite hero*—a literary archetype who embodies self-respect, education, and political resistance. Unlike the tragic Dalit victim in mainstream narratives, the Ambedkarite hero is an agent of change, someone who challenges karma and fatalism with reason and rebellion. This reconfiguration of the protagonist marks a fundamental aesthetic and ideological break. As Satyanarayana notes, the Ambedkarite consciousness does not seek sympathy but solidarity, not tears but transformation ("Political and Aesthetic Significance" 16).

The gendered dimensions of Dalit aesthetics further deepen its complexity. Dalit women writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Gogu Shyamala foreground the intersectionality of caste and gender, complicating the male-centric narratives of Dalit resistance. In their works, the home is not a sanctuary but a site of labor and violence; sexuality is not a domain of intimacy but of control and exploitation. Dalit feminism, as articulated through these narratives, is not an appendage to mainstream feminism but a critique of its caste blindness.

Ultimately, Dalit aesthetics demands a radical reorientation of critical frameworks. It does not seek to be included within existing categories of literary value; it seeks to reconstitute those categories altogether. As Limbale argues, "The yardsticks for evaluating Dalit literature must be different. They must take into account its purpose, form, content, and social context" (Limbāḷe and Mukherjee 105). This requires scholars and critics to develop a more ethical mode of reading—one that is attentive to history, power, and pain.

In conclusion, Dalit literature is not a marginal literature. It is a literature of margins that has become central to understanding India's social reality and literary modernity. It speaks with a voice forged in struggle, using aesthetics not to transcend pain but to transform it. As Arjun

Dangle has emphasized, Dalit literature is both a mirror and a hammer—it reflects the world as it is and breaks it open to reveal what it could be (Kumar, *Dalit Literature* 90). In doing so, it reminds us that the aesthetic is never neutral. It is always a choice, and in the case of Dalit literature, it is a choice for justice.

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