

Race Caste and Gender in English Literature

Dr. Jaysing R. Babar
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Shahu College, Pune,
Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Dalits and African Americans choose various forms to write about their bitter experiences in their life such as poetry, drama, novel, and autobiography. Writers from both Dalit and African American literature rejected mainstream literature and started their own form of writing to express their life experiences which become a dominant form of literature. Their literature has become the only medium to express their thought and reveal their problems to the people as they do not have a right to express openly. Each society is divided into two groups - lower and higher class. So the class in power exploits the weaker section and keeps them at the margin. Most of the marginalised sections in the society all over the world have gone through similar kinds of oppressive structure in their respective society. Dalits in India have experienced inhuman treatment and oppression at the hands of higher class for hundreds of years whereas African Americans were

also treated as socially, culturally and economically inferior for the last four centuries. Though the period of oppression of Dalits is more than that of African Americans, both these sections of society have experienced marginality and oppression almost similarly in their respective countries. According to Vilfredo Pareto, the higher class in society succeeded in each sphere of life. He observes that “The elite is a small number of individuals who in each sphere of activity have succeeded and arrived at a higher echelon in the professional hierarchy” (Pareto 212). This is what we find in both Dalit and African American communities.

Along the same line of argument S. D. Kapoor observes that a study of marginalised and oppressed groups is not only natural but also necessary. It is essential because Dalits and African Americans struggle to reinforce their identity as human beings, which had been denied to them for a long time. It appears from the available literature that African Americans have taken lead to regain their identity and their struggle to regain their identity later motivated Dalits in India. Therefore, it is a notable fact that social and cultural ideas travel from one country to another through strong leadership and literature to liberate depressed groups.

If we consider these communities in relation with oppression and marginalization in their respective societies, they have undergone almost the same kind of mental, physical, psychological turmoil and have been a part of humiliation, torture, exploitation, inferior status, disgrace, pain, sufferings, and discrimination on the basis of caste,

class,gender and race. It has been observed that African Americans and Dalits have been marginalised and oppressed in the racist American society and the casteist Indian society respectively. Furthermore, Dalit and African American women have also been oppressed and marginalised within their caste and race respectively. Indian Dalit and African American writers are at the forefront in writing about the issues of marginality and oppression of both their people in their respective societies.

'Dalit', is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Dalita', which means 'oppressed', is a Marathi word which means 'broken'. The term 'Dalit' is used in the nineteenth century in the context of oppression faced by the untouchables from the class in power. In the present time, the word 'Dalit' does not represent only untouchables; in Dalit literature the term is widely applied to all marginal, aboriginal, subaltern, and other groups including minority groups like Muslims, Christians, Neo-Buddhists and also the so-called upper caste women in India who have been discriminated down the ages.

The term 'African American' is a recent term used for the Black Americans. At the initial stage, they were taken from Africa to America and made to serve as slaves. They were kept apart, because of the pigment of their skin in America by whites. They were made to live in ghettos. The slavery was imposed upon them for more than three centuries. But they did not forget their history, their memories about Africa. Africa occupies a special place in their hearts. Therefore, they call themselves African American. Their identity has travelled from

'coloured' to 'Negro', 'Negro' to 'Black American', 'Black American' to 'Afro-American' and 'Afro-American' to 'African American'. These terms are used for referring to Americans with an African ancestry. The term Negro is used to those who were taken to America as a slave from Africa but the term 'Black American' is used for people who have slave ancestors. 'Afro-American' is used for American born blacks, who get their spirit from African Slaves whereas 'African American' is a term that is widely used to describe all people with an African ancestry such as Africa, Ghana or Haiti or the other Caribbean islands, whether in recent times or centuries ago as it is felt that all have an African ancestry. They represent the history of two cultures and countries. In Africa, they enjoyed the power but in America they are in a marginal position.

Indian Dalit literature deals with the life of Dalits in Indian society. Dalit literature is not a literature which only gives readers pleasure as some mainstream literature does; it is a literature, in which we can find pain, sufferings of Dalit people, which they have gone through in their day-to-day life. Dalit writers have protested for their identity and showed their resistance against oppression and the marginalisation of their community in their society. They assert that we all are human beings, so there should be equality for all. The novels such as Kishor Kale's *Against All Odds*, Joseph Macwan's *The Steppchild* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* deals with the life of Dalits in Indian society.

Against All Odds represents and unfolds the darkest

and the unknown world of the Kolhati Community, especially women and children. It is the story of a tamasha dancer and her illegitimate son from the Kolhati community and the struggle and anguish of a young boy attempting to break free from the demeaning customs and lifestyle of his community. It is the heart-touching story of Shanta who wants to become a school teacher but becomes a Tamasha dancer and then the mistress of Nana, and how little Kishya, an illegitimate son of a Kolhati woman, becomes a Dr. Kishor Shantabai Kale. *The Stepchild* is an enthralling tale of heroism, love, humiliation, discrimination, marginalisation and oppression of Dalit community. The locale of the novel is rural Charotar, one of the most fertile areas from Gujarat. Macwan represents the life of Hindu Vankar Community when the process of modernisation started in Gujarat. The original Gujarati title, *Angaliyat* stands for a stepchild, who comes to new home holding his/her Mothers' Anguli, after the mother's second marriage. In *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy tries to criticize, deeply rooted social conventions of exploitation and marginalization of untouchables in the rigid caste system and women in the patriarchal society. The Indian constitution provides the legal framework for the final abolition of untouchability but unfortunately the division between touchable and untouchables including women is so ingrained in Indian society. Even they are not considered as touchable creatures. This novel shows that untouchables like Velutha were not seen as human but they are treated as nonhuman.

Thus, Dalit Literature shows how there is

discrimination based on caste and gender, sexual abuse, oppression in the Indian society and the effects of this discrimination on the minds of Dalits. Kishor in his novel rightly pointed out the seriousness of casteism. Kishor's mother Shantabai suffered and sexually exploited by many men in the society. Macwan portrays the plight of Teeha and Methi after Teeha's fight with Patidars, a class in power. He gives detailed estimation of Methi's suffering and sexual exploitation though she is not guilty. Kishor Kale, Joseph Macwan and Arundhati Roy project the marginal status of the women and Dalit in Indian society through their novels *Against All Odds*, *The Stepchild* and *The God of Small Things* respectively.

African American Novels concentrates on marginalisation and oppression of African Americans on the basis of race in their country. *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* deals with the black liberation movements. African American literature is a strong response to the mainstream literature written by American writers to reflect their sufferings and pain about their community. Their writings are mainly about the racial discrimination in the American society. African American literature has gone through various phases such as Negro Literature, Black Literature, Afro- American Literature and then African American literature. The researcher has focused on the struggle of African American people to establish themselves as individuals in their own society came to light with writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Tommer, and

Langstone Hughes. Five decades later, Alice Walker carved a niche for herself with her novel *The Color Purple*. Set in the 1930s, the novel chronicles the life of the protagonist Celie and the hardships she faces, first for being born a woman and then for being a black.

It has been shown that several socio-cultural and political movements played an important role in the history of African American literature. The novelists, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou through their writings gave new dimensions to the African American literary tradition. These writers wrote about racial segregation as well as African American feminism in their literary endeavours. They focused on physical and sexual abuse, exploitation of Blacks, dehumanisation, disrespect, oppression, marginalisation, discrimination and African American feminism in their literary endeavours.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* rightly presented the picture of race and gender in this novel. It is a story of female self assertion regarding her own identity. Walker has used epistolary form of writing this novel. Celie writes letters to God and Nettie, which is about her pain and sufferings. Through her letters Nettie tries to instill confidence in Celie to protest for her rights. She writes about the African community, American missionaries, the plight of Olinka people and their protest against white colonisers which makes Celie realize that she to protest for her survival. The history of black women slaves in America is one of sexual exploitation. Rape was the integral part of their lives. In *The Color Purple* Walker

writes about racism, black feminism, class conflict. She portrays sexual harassment, humiliation, oppression received from white as well as black society in America. The novel portrays the inner strength of Celie and how she evolves from being a victim to being a victor towards the end of the novel.

The Bluest eye by Toni Morrison is about marginalisation, oppression, humiliation of African American at each shares of life. In *The Bluest eye* she has shown that black woman were excluded from whites as well as their own society. Characters in Morrison's novels suffer due to internalised racism and double consciousness. It is their psychological condition that they feel inferior to the Whites. Black Women in America have been victimized down the ages on the basis of Race, Gender by the whites and also males from their own society. They were oppressed and pushed towards the margin by the class in power. It is noted that race, class and gender are interrelated to each other in the history of black women oppression. Morrison rightly shows the mental trauma of their life.

In the novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou treats female characters more positively than male African American characters. It is a story of Maya, the black girl who is trapped in a cage like a bird and exploited, oppressed during her life. The Caged Bird represents Maya's imprisonment like other African Americans resulting from marginality, oppression and racism in the America. Maya's struggle in the novel is not her individual struggle, but Angelou depicts the struggle of the African Americans in the American

society. Racism, sexual abuse, marginalisation, domestic violence and oppression are the major issues in the African American literature.

Thus, African American and Indian English novels deals with theme of disheartenment, social insecurity, physical and sexual abuse, rejection in the society, poverty and hunger, displacement, discrimination, naming, dehumanisation and disrespect, ignorance, domestic violence, alcoholism, male supremacy and education. Comparative re-reading of Dalit and African American literature is necessary and important to show the similarities and differences in their exploitation, oppression. Therefore it is just a humble attempt to enlighten the darker side of social mentality who do not consider Dalit, African American and women to be human beings.

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