



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Shared Experiences And Solidarity: The Emergence Of Consciousness Between Dalits And African Americans

Suman Lata Chhachhia

Abstract

This paper examines the common experiences of social marginalization faced by Dalits in India and Black Americans in the United States. Both communities have faced historic discrimination, exclusion, and oppression based on the caste system and slavery, respectively. Dalit literature and Black American Literature are comparable because they share common themes such as social injustice, insecurity, marginalization, and mistreatment by dominant social groups in India and America. Additionally, both Dalits and Afro-Americans have spoken out against religious practices that upheld their enslavement. The situation of Blacks in America is identical to that of the untouchables in India with no differences at all. The current paper endeavours to examine the suppression of voice experienced by Black Americans and Dalits in India through the examination of the works written by them. Delving into personal experiences of Dalit and African American writers' day-to-day living, I construct a framework to investigate the possibilities of solidarity between the two groups. For it, this paper critically compares the social marginalization of Blacks and Dalits and analyzes how they assert their alternative perspectives in the face of the dominant mainstream literary canon with some references to the autobiographies of Om Prakash Valmiki and Langston Hughes.

Keywords: Dalits, African American, marginalization, discrimination, caste.

Introduction

Dalits, known as "untouchables," are a socio-economic group in India who have faced historical discrimination and exclusion based on the caste system. Despite constitutional and legal protections, they continue to experience socio-economic and political marginalization.

Blacks, also known as African Americans, are a racial and ethnic group in the United States who have faced a long history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Despite advances in civil rights, they still experience significant disparities in areas such as education, employment, and income. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought renewed attention to the systemic issues faced by Black communities. Its primary concerns are incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people

The terms "Black" and "Dalit" should only be discussed in the context of various forms of exclusion and the different hierarchies that exist within the caste system, such as gender, class, region, and occupation. Similarly, within the realm of race, different hierarchies of gender, class, religion, and occupation also play a role.

While African American people were forcibly taken from their homeland and sold, on the other hand, Dalits faced the label of "Untouchable" from their birth.

The paper opens up the argument that dominant ideologies of caste, race, class, and gender obscure the authenticity of Black and Dalit experiences. The unique feature of the autobiographies from Black and Dalit communities is their attempt to depict the world and social relationships from the perspective of the marginalized, and this differentiates them from mainstream autobiographies. Despite being distinct in terms of geography and historical context, it is a widely recognized fact that both Dalits and Africans are involved in similar forms of liberation struggles. In America, racism was the main issue, while in India, the caste system played a significant role in shaping the country's social, economic, and cultural systems.

Interconnections Between Dalits and African Americans:

There has been a long history of interconnections between Dalits and African Americans. A key feature shared by both groups is their history of being held in bondage for many centuries. What they primarily lacked was freedom therefore, when examining these two kinds of literature, it becomes clear that they

are, in a sense, a pursuit of human freedom. The colour of their skin has become a defining characteristic of their identity. The exploitation of Dalits is not only based on their caste but like African Americans also on the colour of their skin, which becomes a weapon of oppression. Although it can be argued that the higher castes include both dark-skinned and light-skinned individuals, their colour still plays a role in perpetuating the caste system. Frantz Fanon believed that due to White colonization and European culture, black people have the desire to become White. He argues that White people see themselves as superior to black people, which leads to a traumatic relationship between the two groups.

Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), was well-informed about the American Revolution and Civil War, as well as the mistreatment of African Americans. He studied the biography of George Washington and works by Thomas Paine. In 1873, Phule wrote a tract called "Gulamgiri," meaning "slavery," to address the struggles of the Sudras (peasants) and Dalits against Brahmin domination. Similarly, B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) and other Dalit leaders studied slavery and oppression, often drawing parallels between race and caste as they believed slavery was a powerful metaphor for the caste system (Ambedkar 1989a, 1989b). African Americans in America were treated brutally and subjected to immense suffering. Notable writers such as Amiri Baraka, Alex Haley, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar highlight racism as a key theme in their novels. Women writers including Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker also shed light on their own reality and experiences.

Even though slavery was abolished in 1865 in America and the caste system in 1950 in India, the systemic inequalities and discrimination faced by both groups persist to this day. The official rejection of the caste system has not erased it from the cultural and social landscape in India. In the mid-twentieth century, Ambedkar showed his support for Black Americans by sending a copy of a letter he had addressed to the United Nations on the elimination of caste and racial discrimination to African American sociologist and public intellectual W E B Du Bois. Additionally, in 1972, Dalits were influenced to establish the Dalit Panther Party, modelled after the Black Panther Party. Autobiographies written by Black and Dalit writers are considered to be their representation in the dominant cultural narrative. They are a public response and challenge to the longstanding exclusion and discrimination based on race and caste that is practiced by mainstream writers. Both Dalit women and African American women have faced historical and ongoing oppression and discrimination based on their gender and social status. Sexual abuse and rape are frequent occurrences in both the Dalit and African American communities. Members of dominant castes use these

acts to challenge Dalit and African American men's masculinity and incite violence to maintain control over these communities. In this way, both Dalit women and African American women are doubly marginalized because they experience oppression not just based on their gender but also due to their lower social status within their respective societies.

Dalit writers and African American writers:

Dalit writers and African American writers both have played a crucial role in giving voice to the marginalized communities they belong to. Dalit writers in India often address themes of caste-based discrimination and oppression, while African American writers tackle issues of racism, slavery, and inequality in the United States. Through their works, Dalit and African American writers have made a lasting impact on their communities and on literature as a whole.

Some of the Dalit writers who challenged the social structure of Indian society with their pen are Ambedkar, Namdeo Dhasal, Bama, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Babu Rao Bagul, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, Arjun Dangle, and Sharankumar Limbale. In the same way, some African American writers who wrote about slavery in their works include Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Toni Morrison, Phillis Wheatley, Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, and Colson Whitehead. These writers used their writing as a means of resistance against slavery and its lingering effects, shedding light on the experiences of enslaved Africans and the injustices they faced. Their works continue to be widely read and are considered important contributions to African American literature and the larger American literary canon. Maya Angelou, a highly regarded American poet, writer, and activist, embodies the beauty, strength, and spirit of Black women through her autobiographies, poetry collections, and essays, promoting Black pride, especially Black feminist pride.

With special reference to the writing of Om Prakash Valmiki and Langston Hughes:

Om Prakash Valmiki's writings as a Dalit voice represent the essence of India that has been ignored and silenced for centuries. His works, including *Salaam*, *Ghuspethiye*, *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra*, *Sadiyon Ka Santaap*, *Bas! Bahut Ho Chuka*, *Ab Aur Nahin*, and *Do Chera* provide an in-depth look into the lives of lower-caste Dalits in India's oppressive caste system. In his autobiographical narrative, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, he asserts that Dalits, too, can speak. Langston Hughes, an American writer who was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance made the African American experience the subject of his writings, which ranged from poetry and plays to novels and newspaper columns. He wrote two volumes of autobiography, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, as well as translated several works of literature into English.

Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan* states:

Caste is a very important element of Indian society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one's control, then why would I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's great culture heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit, they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom. (153-154)

Om Prakash Valmiki portrays the boundary between the two classes and states, "Our house was next to Chandrabhan Taga's cattle shed. Families of Muslim weavers lived on the other side of it. Right in front of the cattle shed was a little pond that had created a sort of partition between the Chuhras' dwellings and the village." (*Joothan* 1). Om Prakash Valmiki writes about his school life where his teacher tells him that "All right. See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. Go. Get to it!" (*Joothan* 5)

The above quote portrays the concept of caste in India, where non-Dalits or upper-caste individuals expected Valmiki, a Dalit, to perform manual tasks typically assigned to Chuhras, such as cleaning public spaces and handling the dead. This is an example of imposed norms that enforce physical labour as a result of social and economic subordination.

As a Black individual in a predominantly White community, Langston Hughes had to experience the burden of physical and mental emptiness. Through his writing, Hughes expresses his personal reflections and thoughts on these experiences. In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, he narrates his work as a delivery boy, where the “Boss would always ask why in the hell you took so long to make a delivery. Hurry up and get the next order out” (Hughes 88).

Langston Hughes faced unjust treatment even in the workplace, as he was scolded by his employer for being late, despite working four to five hours of overtime at night. The economic exploitation of Black individuals was a prevalent issue, with forced labour being a common practice. They were subjected to harsh working conditions, and strict supervision, and were treated like animals to survive in a White-dominated society.

Langston Hughes explains his school experiences in the same discriminatory terms as Om Prakash Valmiki’s life experience. Hughes writes:

At first, they did not want to admit me to the school, because there were no other colored families living in that neighborhood. They wanted to send me to the colored school, blocks away down across the railroad tracks. But my mother, who was always ready to do battle for the rights of a free people, went directly to the school board, and finally got me into the Harrison street school- where all the teachers were nice to me, except one who sometimes cared to make remarks about my being colored. And after such remarks, occasionally, the kids would grab stones and tin cans out of the alley and chase me home.” (*The Big Sea* 18)

In schools, Black students were subjected to strict indifference from teachers. This anecdote highlights that race and caste are not the only factors influencing discrimination in society. Hughes writes about the prejudice and discrimination that was present in all aspects of an individual's social experiences:

I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother came from yellow. On my father’s side, the White blood in his family came from a Jewish slave trader in Kentucky Silas Cushenberry of Clark County, who was his mother’s father, and Sam Clay, a dust tiller of Scotch descent, living in Henry County who was his father’s father. So, on my father’s side, both male grandparents were White. (*The Big Sea* 16)

Langston Hughes grapples with understanding his identity, as he experiences a fragmented sense of self. His uncertain wanderings for work, either with or without his mother, symbolizes his struggle to survive in a society that imposes burdens on his race. The journey of Langston Hughes reflects this social burden. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes explores the racial attitudes of his father and the impact they had on their relationship. According to the introduction by Joseph McLaren, Hughes' father "hated Negroes" and this hatred caused a strained relationship between father and son. The book highlights the influence of dominant ideologies on personal connections and how it can cause division even within family ties. The caste system in Hinduism has a similar structure of hierarchy and power dynamic as the racial discourse. Langston Hughes recounts incidents of violence he suffered from Whites in his autobiographies. One such incident is described when a group of White boys viciously beat him for entering a White neighbourhood that was off-limits to Black children. He reflects on the physical and emotional wounds inflicted by such racial discrimination.

Dalits have to share a historical experience that is mostly excluded from the convention of myths and legends. Hence *Joothan* is full of bitter experiences of a Dalit in the particular community. Valmiki writes:

I have not been able to forget these bitter memories. They flash in my mind like lightning every now and then. Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. As though, we are not citizens of this country. The weak and helpless have been oppressed for thousands of years just in this manner. There is no accounting of how many talents have been wiped out by deception and treachery. (*Joothan* 46)

In *Joothan*, Valmiki questions the Hindu identity of Dalits. His question is a preparation for a historical explanation of the caste system and Hinduism, especially from a Dalit perspective. He asks, "If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindu hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? I also wondered why one has to be a Hindu to be a good human being" (48).

Om Prakash Valmiki and Langston Hughes use their personal stories as a means to challenge the dominant social norms and bring to light the oppressions faced by the Black and Dalit communities. Through their writing, they not only assert their own identity but also create an alternative voice in the hegemonic mainstream discourse.

In conclusion, the autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Om Prakash Valmiki serve as political acts of resistance against the oppression and discrimination faced by the Black and Dalit communities. They challenge the mainstream narratives and question the value system that justifies casteism and racism. By connecting their personal histories and experiences of discrimination, the two male autobiographers bring attention to the voicelessness of their communities and raise their voices against it. Through their narratives, they assert their identity and resist the essentialization of individual and social identities. Sharankumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) frankly notes the disparities in the way both are treated:

The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in several ways. Although the African Americans were enslaved, they could buy their freedom with money. At the time, Dalits were technically not slaves; they could not even pay their house rent. The White masters were responsible for looking after the enslaved Black person. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savarnas had no concern for them. Untouchables are socially enslaved people. The cause of African slavery was economic. The root of the Dalit's untouchability is social. African Americans can do any work, but their work is not considered undignified, while Dalits can perform the lowest type of job, but their labour is always termed 'undignified. While African Americans cannot hide the colour of his skin, Dalit cannot hide his caste. (86)

Conclusion

Both Indian and American literature aims to bring about change and create a social revolution, despite differences in their history and current politics. Literature can be a powerful weapon to fight against the unfair treatment of those considered "untouchable" and to protect the identity and rightful place of individuals in society, despite negative stereotypes associated with blackness. Dalit writings came much later compared to Black literature, but they share a similar purpose in using literature as a means to challenge oppression and fight for justice and equality in their respective societies. The emergence of consciousness and solidarity between Dalits and African Americans has the potential to challenge and transform existing power structures, promoting a more inclusive and democratic transnational political movement. The writings of these communities serve as a powerful tool to shed light on their experiences, inspire empathy and cultural exchange, and work towards a more equitable and just society.

References:

Patil, Rajani S. "The Similarities in the Life Experiences of Dalit and Black Community: A Review."

Sarode, Rajendra Gorakh. "Dalit Literature and Black American Literature: The Voices of the Marginalized."

Paik, Shailaja. "Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42.3/4 (2014): pp. 74-96.

Abhijith, T. S. "Dalits and Blackness: The Politics and Aesthetics of Blackness in Select Dalit Poetry." *Literary Herald* 2: pp.1-16.

Sageera, M. P. *Voice of the voiceless: a comparative study on the selected autobiographies of Black and Dalit writers*. Diss. Department of English, Farook College, University of Calicut, 2021, 2021.

Valmiki, Om Prakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya, 2003.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An autobiography*. Hill and Wang, 2015.

Limbale, Sharankumar *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Trans. by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Longman PVT. limited, New Delhi, 2004. P-86

