Writing as a Process of Reconstructing and Reforming Fractured Communities

Pratibha Singh
2/1, Railway Colony Sarojini Nagar, Near Chanakya Puri, New Delhi-110021

Abstract

Though India is mounting towards development in varied fields but cast system conversely, till present, situates as an encumbrance in the overall augmentation of the nation, overlooking a substantial amount of inhabitants. The way Dalits are treated in India is similar to the way African-Americans were pressed to the periphery and looked down upon in America. This hierarchy has been apparent not just in the social order but in literature as well. The atrocities of both these marginal groups were not endowed with adequate magnitude or voice and hence, the subaltern was not a component of the literary canon for a very extensive period of time. It is solely through their ceaseless endeavors that they have made their way from the edge towards the core. Progressively the ever hushed and tangential subaltern groups started putting across their unfortunate experience by sharing them with the outside world through writing. These writers, through minority groups chose to share their tribulation through the medium of writing in order to harmonize and to fortify the sufferers with positivity as well as to claim parity and sovereignty. Dalit and African-American communities have had a comparable experience of chronological marginalization which led to their united resentment.

However, Literature has the potential to connect the past with present and also, at the same time, assists the country, society and individual to reconsider their concerns. Therefore, I will take up the following texts in my paper and highlight the above mentioned ideas.

In, Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man (1912), James Weldon Johnson, represents the position of a Mulatto protagonist, residing in America under conditions of white dominance. The narrator-protagonist in the novel illustrates the consequences of racial discrimination and brutality on the protagonist’s subjectivity and worldview. His problematic state further leads to ambivalence of his identification with his (legally) black and (visibly) white societies and his eventual resolution to get ahead as a white in order to escape the disgust of racism.

A similar kind of revelation of discrimination can be noticed in the writings of Bama Faustina Soosairaj, a Dalit writer from Tamil Nadu, who bears a sense of labor and purpose in her writing. She stands as a challenge for the Indian literary canon merely for a few reasons; first of all, she is a woman and second and most importantly she is a Dalit woman. She stimulated the tranquil world with her first piece of writing.
that was published in 1992, *Karukku*, followed by *Sangathi*. She shared her experiences with the whole wide world through writing and has been a notable part of Literature ever since. In *Karukku*, Bama exemplifies her identity dilemma of being a Dalit and her struggle for survival against patriarchy. Through her writing, she describes the importance of empowerment, education and employment for those who are exploited for various years. She reinforces the fact that for a better living, eradication of untouchability is imperative, so that the victims of Casteism can take pride in their true identities.

These examples make the fact very evident that in order to come out of their trivial state(s), these writers chose to facilitate writing as an expression of their uneven past. Writing was used as a tool by such marginalized and oppressed writers to awaken the consciousness of the population and also to heal themselves through the written word.

My paper, through the chosen texts/writers, will try to explore the importance of writing one’s experiences down and the way it helps in converting a fragmented identity into a complete whole.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, African American, Fractured subaltern communities, Progression.

Marginalization is an immense impediment faced by a variety of sections of the social order. A number of communities have been pushed to the periphery of the society from a very extensive period of time. These sections have had experience of enormous containment and inequity. The focus of such communities is greatly upon declaration of human rights, individuality, mutiny against inequality and desire for a new-fangled society; devoid of favoritism. Literature of the marginalized confers such two dissimilar Diasporas but one general idea of humanity in Black Americans and Dalit Indians.

Dalits and African-American communities have had an analogous experience of chronological marginalization, which further escorted to their cohesive resentment. However, Literature has tried to incorporate and support these marginalized sectors, it has given tone of expression and prospective to these sections to amalgamate past with present and also, at the same time, aided the nation, civilization and individual to reassess their apprehension. Both these literatures have a facet of remonstration and to rummage for identity. They have elevated plenteous voices to emphasize their tribulations. This paper shall discuss the significance laid by the marginalized writers on the act of writing and recording their brutal experiences. For such writers, the act of sharing and unfolding the bruised history of neglected communities becomes an act which proves to be a therapeutic process for both the writers and the readers of Dalit and Black communities.

The term Dalit, is a Marathi word, which means devastated. In the current circumstances the word Dalit does not symbolize merely untouchables; the term in fact, is an extensively germane word to all subsidiary, indigenous, subaltern in addition to other groups like Muslims, Christians,
Neo Buddhists and also to upper caste women in India, who are distinguished against physically, economically and socially (Negotiating Margins: African American and Dalit writings). Indian Dalit writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Mahashweta Devi, Faustina Bama have instituted a distinctiveness and brought about a colossal uprising in Dalit literature in India. These writers believed in the notion that writing is essential in communities that have been debarred from didactic prospect; in communities with lower literacy rates. Although for those in the boundaries, admittance to value edification and encouragement for writing is not easily accessible. In the midst of poor literacy rates along with monetary complexity, a lot of marginalized inhabitants locate writing itself as opulence. The act of writing becomes exceedingly crucial for them to demonstrate their individuality and also to make others aware and acknowledge their predicament. Writing for such writers bears out to be a form of “catharsis” (Jane Schukoske), through writing, an individual can articulate her/his self and is able to comprehend excruciating distress better and also, can share them with others at the similar moment in time. Writing, therefore, legitimates one’s story/reality which can be used to make one’s affliction accredited. This can be better understood with collaboration to Faustina Bama’s Karukku (1992) along with James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of An Ex- Colored Man (1912).

Faustina Bama began to be distinguished as a writer with the publication of Karukku (1992). Her novel demonstrates the appearance of Dalit writings and made her one of the foremost Dalit woman writers in India. The narration moves from past to present, exploring a variety of events, that she had experienced during her life. Her work has been called an influential representation of Dalit suppression by numerous critics and readers. Karukku illustrates not just her individual sufferings but the exploitation and suppression of the entire Dalit community. Bama, in one of her interviews stated that “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences; experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations”. Therefore, through her novel, she is sharing her agony with her community as well as with inhabitants belonging to further superior classes.

One of the most significant aspects presented in the novel is the oppression of Dalit Christians in the hands of the church. Karukku gives a picture of how Dalits were discriminated against of which Bama provides a variety of accounts; they were not allowed to sing in the church choir, there were different schools for the affluent, elitist upper caste Christians and for poor Dalit non Christians. In her works, she depicts how she and her community have been deceived by the assurance of autonomy and distinction by the convent, the church and by humanity as a whole. Bama outlines her religious growth as a Catholic and her realization of herself as a Dalit: for instance, her portrayal of her exclusion from the rituals of which she was initially a participant, but later was debarred from the
same for being an ‘untouchable’. Bama wrote in the preface of her novel: “The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these, taken together.”, providing her readers with an idea of her aspirations to write this novel, that is, to empathize and heave alertness amid her readers regarding the ghastly state of Dalits.

In the novel, Bama is introduced to the structure of untouchability when she was a student of third standard. While returning from school, she witnessed an upsetting incident of a Dalit handing over a small package to an upper caste man, but without touching it. He had tied the small package to a thread in order to make sure that the small package is not ‘polluted’ by his contact. This disturbing episode made Bama question the society, and leaves her wondering “what did it mean when they call us ‘Paraiya’?” “We too are human beings” (13). Incidents like these stimulated her to search for ways to fortify herself and her community from the compressed state. Bama’s elder brother, however, makes her realize the importance of education for her emancipation. Her brother makes her comprehend that she can never be endowed with dignity or revere, as she is a part of ‘paraiya jati’ unless she educates herself and thus leaving a profound impact upon her. After completing her education, Bama takes up a job of a teacher at a convent but soon becomes conscious that the circumstances there are not much different. She observes the various ways with which Dalit children and teachers are exploited by the upper class nuns. Thus, revealing the hypocrisy that lies inside the sacred walls of educational institution and church. Bama, through her novel takes an exceptionally courageous action of penetrating an area where no other Dalit woman had ever stridden.

She illustrates the never-ending state of oppression through a variety of instances, out of one is that of her grandmother. Her grandmother was a servant at an upper class family and was commanded over even by the children of the house. She, on the contrary, used to address them as ‘Ayya’, which means master. Her grandmother has accepted her fate as a servant and used to appease Bama by making her understand that: “These (upper caste) people are maharajas who feed us and without them how will we survive?” Bama confers how Dalits were fed with the leftovers of the upper castes; they were unnecessarily insulted and beaten and one such incident is mentioned by the writer when she is falsely charged for “stealing coconut”. She is blamed, rebuked, trodden and suspended in the name of caste, and the validation she received by those in authority for their conduct goes like: “after all you are from chery, You might have done it. You must have done it.” Regardless of surpassing in her studies, she is treated with blatant insolence by her teachers and other fellow students. The facts that Dalits are made to
toil under upper caste families as bonded laborers; the refusal of upper castes to sit by the those belonging to lower castes in order to keep their ‘purity’ undamaged and how Dalit children at her school were asked to stand for the duration of assembly and were made to do all the menial and personal works of the educators, together act as a reminder to her of the actualities about her caste and eventually agitating her to shriek for parity through her writing, by keeping the portrayal of repression, untouchability, casteism, as the focal concerns of Bama throughout the novel. To her the resolution to all the misery lies in education and expression. According to her, it is merely through education that the subjugated can have a chance to establish their capability as equals. She outlines the atrocity of those in authority by stating the following “It is because of this we are unable to find way to study and to proceed like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us.” She sympathizes with the fellow bearers and exclaims that they are all “dying several deaths within”. For her, the realization and courage to introspect and to revolutionize “is true devotion to God”. Her departure from the religious order and her lenience with superior regions of education and deliverance of the downtrodden is the outcome of her devastating history as a Dalit.

Hence, in Karukku, Bama portrays lives of the unfortunate section of the society; her portrayal is the representation of excruciating experiences as a Dalit headed for progression of self recognition and liberation. She emphasizes the idea of eradicating disparity at various levels and empowerment through education and consequently for a better survival of Dalits.

Akin to Dalit literature that highlights the caste prejudice of Indian society; African American literature has concentrated on the role of people of African American descent with reference to the superior American society that is highly color prejudiced. The great efforts of African American populace to ascertain themselves as individuals in their own right came to light with the writings of Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Richard Waldo Emerson and various other literary giants of African American derivation.

James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-colored man depicts whites’ enthrallment with skin color and the possibility of ‘passing’ as a white. Passing refers to the capability of an individual to be considered as a member of social set other than their own with the intention of gaining societal acceptance. The novel estimated much of the literature of Harlem Renaissance. The novel’s central character is a black who is light enough to pass as a white. When the protagonist realizes that by forcing himself in the white community he can ignore the atrocious and fearful life of Black society, he decides to pass as a member of white culture. Benjamin J. Patterson in Ethnic groups USA, states that the novel illustrates the penalty of racial bigotry and hostility on the protagonist’s subjectivity and worldview; and it results in the oscillation of his conflicting identifications with the black and white.
cultures and his final decision to pass as white. The circumstances are such that the Ex-colored man realizes that he cannot attain his ambition, a name, recognition and a better future as a Black and therefore decides to spend his life as white. His assessment is based on the intensity of oppression performed through diverse forms of racial favoritism apparent in the realities of segregation and racially motivated violent behavior such as ‘lynching’. The binary system is such that white signifies ‘normalcy’ and ‘superiority’ and black, on the contrary, is associated with ‘other’ and ‘inferior’.

While Patterson entitles the achievements of the anonymous protagonist “personal” and “hollow”, the protagonist’s employment of mixed race inheritance to his own advantage depicts the exigency for ways to redefine as well as to secure his position in the society. His denial to name himself becomes a threat to the white society, as they fall short to identify and control him, making him a prospective rebellious force. The powerless section, through the protagonist, overcomes racial prejudice, objectification and detestation by the superior white society. The protagonist ensures his endurance in a hostile milieu through forged identity and anonymity but at the same time, he is torn into fragmented self as he cannot identify to either black or white society. The theme of passing, written by a black author, gives the readers an idea of how the oppression and brutality of whites made an individual disguise his genuine identity and recreated the convention of color partition, policy which demands that one accepts a position within a determined social order. When the protagonist finally decides to wholly get ahead as white at the end of the novel, he has decided to stifle a major part of his identity, thus annihilating his probability to accomplish true contentment and self-awareness.

Correspondingly, the account of Dalit writers contains equivalent themes of exclusion and expression. The works of these marginalized authors include descriptions of the lives of the poor, the inconceivable regulations that were imposed upon untouchables, and Blacks, their atrocities, and the inequality they faced. These writers chose the form of writing to represent their fortitude and documentation of tales of conquerors, tales of righteousness, conquering uncertainties. Genres like that of writing and other ways of expression play key roles in social alteration movements. Autobiography, narrative, theatre and verse grant prospects to identify disparity. For the marginalized, writing is imperative as it advances the sense of identity and offers instants of stimulation that subsequently endow them with valor to ensue. This awakening of united vigilance has the potential to construct confidence to verbalize and articulate for a group of people and in opposition to injustice. In support of the marginalized, writing provides insightful expanses that allow readers to commiserate, to identify a stance that the society may refute or rationalize in daily interactions. An unswerving, opinionated writing is an unswerving call for civilian feat. This stimulation is capable of
bringing parity, transparency and accountability among society.

India and America exhibit analogous hegemonic socio-economic-cultural-political structures of oppression that demarcate the identities of the marginalized in the respective civilizations. Dalit writers in India and Black writers in America have formed potent literature in the route of time that can no longer be entitled, Marginalized literature, as it has come to inhabit central phase as Mainstream literature.

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