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Canonical Counter Discourse in Dalit Poetry

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Abstract

This research paper explores the counter discourse in selected Dalit poetry. The canonical mainstream literature is hegemonic in nature which denied the existence of Dalit literature. Counter discourse refers to a form of resistance to dominant discourses or prevailing ideas and beliefs that are considered oppressive, unjust or discriminatory. It involves challenging the status quo and offering alternative perspectives and narratives that challenge the dominant ideology. The aim of counter discourse is to bring attention to marginalized perspectives, voices and experiences that are often excluded or silenced in dominant discourses. Dalit literature is a form of literature that represents the experiences of Dalits, who are historically marginalized communities in India. It creates the counter discourse thus challenging the dominant discourse. It involves in Challenging the Brahminical Discourse, Asserting Dalit Identity, Critiquing Upper Caste Hegemony and Documenting the Lives of Dalits.

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Introduction

Counter discourse refers to a form of resistance to dominant discourses or prevailing ideas and beliefs that are considered oppressive, unjust or discriminatory. It involves challenging the status quo and offering alternative perspectives and narratives that challenge the dominant ideology. The aim of counter discourse is to bring attention to marginalized perspectives, voices and experiences that are often excluded or silenced in dominant discourses. Counter discourse can take many forms, such as literature, art, media, and activism, and is often associated with social movements that seek to challenge and transform existing power structures. In essence, counter discourse seeks to create a space for alternative viewpoints and narratives, and to challenge and subvert the dominant discourse in order to bring about social change. The present paper explores the idea of counter discourse in the context of Dalit poetry.

As Helen Tiffin argues, canonical "counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'" (Tiffin 1987, 23)

Dalit literature is a form of literature that represents the experiences of Dalits, who are historically marginalized communities in India. The term "Dalit" refers to those who were formerly known as "untouchables" or "outcasts" in the caste system of Hindu society. Counter discourse in Dalit literature refers to the resistance and opposition to dominant discourses that have perpetuated caste-based discrimination and oppression. Here are some examples of counter discourse in Dalit literature:

Challenging the Brahminical Discourse

Dalit writers have challenged the Brahminical discourse, which has traditionally legitimized the caste system and perpetuated caste-based oppression. They have exposed the violence and discrimination that Dalits face in everyday life and have highlighted the importance of challenging Brahminical norms and values.

Doesn't tell a story,
Doesn't play a tune.
Doesn't make words dance
to the rhythm of music or drums.

(My Poem, Lines: 1-4)

The above lines make clear the concerns of the mainstream literature which has often been considered as imaginative, musical and different from everyday life experience. The words 'story', 'tune' and 'dance' reinforces this aspect of literature.

The literature was conceived as the domain of the learned and intellectual upper caste people.

Isn't a ploy to impress the learned,
fool the ignorant, or
praise the cogitations of
impostors drunk on arrogance

(My Poem, Lines: 5-8)

Dalit writers challenge the traditional preoccupation of literature by infusing the Dalit element in it. By doing this, they wanted to assert their difference and claim the position which traditionally been denied to them.

Asserting Dalit Identity

Dalit literature has also focused on asserting a positive Dalit identity and countering negative stereotypes and representations of Dalits in mainstream literature. This involves celebrating the rich cultural heritage of Dalit communities, including their music, folklore, and art. Traditionally, Dalit were forced to live the life of oppression and humiliation. They were involved in manual or menial work and thus denying them the dignity of work. More or less, Dalits still live such a humiliating life which lacks even the basic amenities but the perspective has changed to look at them. Dalits take pride in whatever they do and they are not embarrassed to talk about their experience. In the poem 'My People', the Kannada Dalit poet Siddalingaiah described the work of Dalit people in the following lines,

They who died of starvation
They who got kicked around and fell
They who touch the master's feet and beg with folded hands,
They who sweat and fry in the sun
They who raised mansions, built bungalows
They who lay by the roadside
They who paid interest and burnt to ashes
They who dig up gold
They who weave cloth

Poverty, exploitation, manual work, insecurity, embarrassment are the facts of Dalit existence. Do they protest against it? Unfortunately, as Siddalingaiah states that

They do as they are told, my people.
They are content to live on air, my people

(My People, Lines: 19-20)

Critiquing Upper Caste Hegemony

Dalit literature has also critiqued the hegemony of upper-caste voices in Indian literature and has emphasized the need for more representation and visibility of Dalit voices. This involves challenging the dominant narratives and structures that have excluded Dalit voices and experiences.

Doesn't pay heed to the
pretensions of tattered-dhoti moralists.

(My Poem, Lines: 12-13)

The upper caste people excluded Dalits from the social, economic, education and culture domain. It was considered as a heinous crime even to utter so called holy names by Dalits. Now the scenario needs to be changed. The moralists who denied Dalits their rights, are questioned now. Dalits are rising like a falcon and nobody would stop its flight. Dalits have understood the hidden agenda of the exploiters and perpetrators of inequality. Unless Dalits dismantle the hegemonic structure created by Upper Caste, the egalitarian society would be a distant dream.

They who made shoes for their God-fearing,
Feasting exploiters, my people.

(My People, Lines: 15-16)

How do the upper castes maintain their supremacy? Through fear and exploitation. They upheld the Brahminic structure where they could establish their supremacy and imbibe the moral fear in the minds of the Dalits so that they were forced to accept the life without any complaint. The Chamars who were traditionally responsible for making shoes for the upper caste without even demanding anything in return.

Documenting the Lives of Dalits

Dalit literature has also focused on documenting the lives and struggles of Dalits. This involves capturing the lived experiences of Dalits and their resistance to caste-based discrimination and oppression. It also involves exploring the intersections of caste, gender, and class in the experiences of Dalits. Dalits were invisible and ignored in the mainstream literature. Even if they get representation, it is out of sympathy and get a passive role. Dalits want to erase this image and want to rectify the wrong representation of Dalits in literature. As Indhudhara Honnapura rightly depicts the Dalits:

Exhorts life; opens up and shows
Its throbbing, pining, eruptions,
and its cruel clutches.
Sows the anguish of my toiling and
productive brethren,
Helps sprout new life voices.

(My Poem, Lines: 14-19)

Dalits are emerging as an active agent in all walks of life. They are not ready to accept the role assigned to them by the hegemonic tradition. They want to express their anguish against the system which had enslaved them from time immemorial. They want their own authentic representation. This is the beginning of a new epoch in the life of Dalit people. How long will Dalits continue to tolerate the burden of the hegemonic and oppressive tradition? Now the time has come to destroy the old mansion and built a new on the principles of equality and brotherhood.

Empty-handed they came and sat down with a sigh,
and wrapped their empty bellies in cloth, my people.

(My People, Lines: 15-19)

Dalit life is full of misery and exploitation. However, Dalits never raised a voice of protest against the system. They bore everything 'silently'. They led the life of starvation,

humiliation and exploitation. They were looked down upon as they did not get basic amenities. Food, shelter, cloths and education were not easily accessible to them. As they belong to the lowest strata of society and it was impinged on their mind to serve the upper-caste, they keep on doing their duty ceremoniously. The poet has vividly described the pathetic situation of Dalits through the use of paradox.

They who raised mansions, built bungalows
and got buried in the foundation, my people.
They who lay by the roadside and bore their lot silently,
they who wept silently, my people.
They who paid interest and burnt to ashes
in a blaze of speeches;
They who dig up gold and have never seen food,
They who weave cloth and go naked,

(My People, Lines: 9-18)

Dalit life is paradoxical in nature. They didn't get what they deserved to get. They build the mansion for others but they didn't have one to live in. They built roads but they are nowhere to go. They mine gold but without any share in it. Their loans always remain unpaid generation after generations. They stitch clothes for others but without having any for themselves. They are exploited socially, economically and culturally.

They do as they are told, my people.
They are content to live on air, my people.

(My People, Lines: 19-20)

To conclude, counter discourse in Dalit literature involves challenging dominant discourses and structures that perpetuate caste-based discrimination and oppression. It also involves asserting a positive Dalit identity and documenting the lives and struggles of Dalits.

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