

Tracing the Homogeneity between Dalit and Australian Aboriginal Communities: A Historical and Literary Perspective

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Abstract: *There is a remarkable homogeneity between the Dalit and the Aboriginal communities in their ethnicity, their distinctive ethos, their predicaments and their prospects. Dalits are the indigenous people of India like Australian Aborigines who are the first people of the continent. The basic premise of this paper is to trace the similarities between these two communities with special focus from the historical and literary perspective. Both the communities have, hitherto, been misrepresented or underrepresented in the mainstream literature. These writers share the same objectives in penning their life-writings – to disseminate information about their arduous journey of life due to marginalisation, to assert their rights, to exhibit their sustained efforts to reclaim their dignity and identity and to spread the message of hope. Their widespread literary awakening and their attempt to rewrite their history have begun more or less during the same period – in the 1960s and the 70s. Most of the Dalit literature and the Aboriginal literature are in the form of autobiographical writings.*

Keywords: *casteism, racism, indogenous, marginalization, Stolen Generation, autobiography*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Caste and Race

Dalits are the indigenous people of India like Australian Aborigines who are the first people of the continent. Dalits in India are oppressed by casteism whereas the Aboriginal Australians are oppressed by racism. Mridula Garg juxtaposes the cruelties of casteism with that of racism. She authentically states:

... I must record my strong objection to the semantic quibble asserting that caste is not on par with race ... Caste based discrimination is one of the worst forms of racism because it is practiced against one's own country men. Like race, it is determined by birth and does not end with death but passes from generation to generation. In theory, it is possible to escape caste (unlike race) by changing one's religion but in practice, we know, caste follows us into whichever religion we convert to.

1.2. Marginalisation of Dalits: Historical Perspective

The Dalits in India have been marginalised for centuries together in the name of caste hierarchy instituted by the Vedic tradition. The term Dalit came into prominence in 1972, when a group of Marathi writers-activists founded Dalit Panthers – an organisation to voice their rights. The Dalits have been considered as avarnas, who do not fall within the Savarna system based on the four-caste division. They have been oppressed, mortified, ostracised, and treated, rather ill treated by the Savarna society since time immemorial. Analysing the root cause of caste division and its origin, T.K.Oommen writes:

The Aryans brought with them, or gradually evolved, a religion (Hinduism), a language (Sanskrit) and a new social order and colour (varna) based stratification system, all of which are essential

ingredients of the ‘national’ heritage today.... The varna scheme, which divided population into five social categories – Brahmins, Kshatrias, Vaishyas, Shudras and the ‘Untouchables’ – based on social division of labour, had become the founding rock of the caste system which institutionalized inequality in India. That is, the immigrant Aryans got nativized and their cultural baggage became the ‘national’ heritage. But since it happened in the distant past and occurred gradually, the process appears to be, and has come to be, accepted as natural. (1998: 229-230)

Caste, “the distinctive social institution attributed to India” (Inden 1990: 49) has wrought havoc in the lives of the Dalits for centuries. They have been treated worse than animals and forced to live on the outskirts of the villages, under filthy conditions, at the beck and call of the upper castes. They are ordained to do menial jobs and even prohibited to share the natural resources like water with the upper castes. Even their very sight and touch have been considered as impure and taboo. They are forbidden to enter into temple and worship Gods of their choice. To be precise, they have been ostracised by the Savarna society. Their subhuman life has been accepted by them as well as the upper castes as an order of the life. Their history of exploitation continues till now even after sixty years of Indian Independence. Thus, equality has remained just as a myth in Indian constitution, which proves to be ineffective in realising the formation of an egalitarian society, despite its reservation policies and other schemes to facilitate upward mobility. Caste continues to be the debilitating disease which poses a threat to the national integrity and solidarity. Even the repressive violence of imperialistic regime will be less severe when compared to caste-based violence and discrimination in a democratic country.

With the increase in caste-based discrimination and violence, there is a proportionate increase in the awareness among the Dalits. In the beginning of the twentieth century, chiefly due to the iconoclastic doctrines of Babasaheb Ambedkar and also because of the education promoted by the Colonial rule, there was a widespread awareness among them. Ambedkar awakened the Dalits from their stoical endurance of sub-human existence. He educated them about their human rights and inspired them to struggle for their rights. He was the life force and cast a spell on the marginalised. As a result, they started to realise the need for reclaiming their rights as human beings. They were unfettered from their age-old belief that they had been terrible sinners to be born in the marginalised community. With this awakening, they started giving expression to their hitherto muted predicament, chiefly through their autobiographical writings.

1.3. Marginalisation of Aboriginal Australians: Historical Perspective

If caste is the overarching “ethno” factor affecting the lives of the Dalits, the Australian Aborigines are marginalised by race. The Aboriginal people, the first people of the land, were deprived of their basic human rights, dispossessed of their native land and were doomed to live a subhuman life due to the colonial invasion. Stephen Mueck and Adam Shoemaker capture the ethos of the Aboriginal people: “No people on earth have lived successfully for so long in such a diverse range of environments; it is generally accepted that the Aboriginal peoples can claim to have the oldest continuously maintained cultures of earth” (2004: 22). They chronicle the history of marginalisation of the Aborigines. They say:

The destiny of the Indigenous ‘tribes’ was forged as soon as the Europeans arrived with a terra nullius mentality. Impelled by the imperatives of colonization and development, they saw the country as a virgin land for their taking. The Indigenous people were chased off their lands, marginalized, and even poisoned and massacred. At the beginning of the 20th century their numbers were seriously diminished and they became an invisible people. (2004: 55)

The victimisation of Aborigines due to colonialism is described thus:

Over the decades from 1830 to 1910, a large proportion of Aboriginal land was taken over, curbing if not crippling local hunter-gatherer economics. ... Aborigines were murdered and dispossessed and forced to negotiate new means of survival. ... Aborigines became a long line of native peoples who were victims of British imperialism, of colonial greed and callousness.... (Grimsha et al. 1994: 131)

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The Colonial Government claimed that the policies like The Aborigines Act (1905), The Native Administration Act (1936) and Natives (Citizenship Right) Act (1944) were instituted “in the best interests of the people”(qtd. in Terszak 2008: 99). On the contrary, these policies turned out to be pernicious in the lives of the Aboriginal people. The colonial supremacy and exploitation resulted in the increasing population of half-caste children. Joseph Pugliese precisely states:

Confronted by ‘the moral panic’ presented by the ‘growing number of mixed ancestry... [t]he notion of a cultural or genetic throwback threatened the purity of white Australia. This panic induced the emergence of a new form of social relation: ‘assimilation colonialism’. The violence of assimilation colonialism resulted in the institutional abduction of Aboriginal children from their families and the attempted fragmentation and erasure of indigenous practices, values and beliefs. (1995: 232).

The government began uprooting the children of mixed parentage from their Aboriginal linkage and attempted to wipe out even the vestiges of Aboriginality. Thousands and thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents, family, and their community on the basis of their colour and were institutionalised. These children were indoctrinated with white culture and values and were totally extricated from their own Aboriginal culture and people. This was done to commit ethnic genocide – obliterating the trace of Aboriginal culture. It was generally believed that “right up until about 1965, most white Australians were convinced that they were overseeing the demise of an inferior race and culture, and that Aboriginal people were simply unable to adapt and prosper in white society” (Muecke and Shoemaker 2004: 69). The institutionalised children were referred to as belonging to the ‘Stolen Generation’ and were forced to subsist as per the alien White norms and patterns. Eventually, they became the victims of deprivation without a sense of belonging. As Fanon succinctly puts it, they had to live with the “Zebra striping of the mind” (qtd. in Terszak 2008: 146), oscillating between white values and black feelings, desperately searching for an identity. As Casey points out: “For much of the twentieth century, Indigenous Australians were controlled by discriminatory legislation that restricted their education, their employment, their wages and access to their earnings and made it very difficult for them to break into the arts in any media” (2009: 193).

Only in the 1960s, the Indigenous Australians contrived to get “a measure of success in their battles for a recognized place in Australia” (Casey 2009: 193). They started to voice their so far suppressed rights through their writings. David Unaipon is generally considered as “the earliest pioneer of Aboriginal writing and publishing and is commonly thought to be the first Aboriginal writer in Australia” (Heiss). Though he began writing as early as 1920s, the Aboriginals made their historic attempt to (re)write their histories only in the 1960s (Nayar 2009: 173), predominantly through their autobiographical writings. Their plight in the Government homes without adequate amenities, their choice less, option less predicament, their forced enslavement were for the first time expressed and exposed through these writings. Thus, Dalits in India have been victimised by casteism and the Aboriginal people in Australia have been subjugated by racism.

1.4. Literary Perspective:

Both the Dalit and Aboriginal communities have, hitherto, been misrepresented or underrepresented in the mainstream literature. These writers share the same objectives in penning their life-writings – to disseminate information about their arduous journey of life due to marginalisation, to assert their rights, to exhibit their sustained efforts to reclaim their dignity and identity and to spread the message of hope. The dominant and hegemonic societies have tried to efface the history of the Dalits and the Aboriginals and thereby have done irredeemable injustice to them. As Alok Mukherjee says in his Translator’s Introduction to *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*:

Discussion of the literary and cultural representations of marginalised and dispossessed people, such as members of India’s untouchable and aboriginal communities, has for the most part, been based on the writings of uppercaste writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand, Mahaswetha Devi and Premchand. For Dalit writers, many of these narratives are part of a ‘disclosure of pity’. (2004: vii)

Arun Prabha Mukherjee also attests that Indian writing had been written in “a voice that contains, rather than expresses, Dalit experience” (2007: ix). They had “portrayals of Dalits as mute and pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression...” (2007: ix). Their anguish, trauma, and woes have never been represented in the history or in the mainstream literature and they have been subjugated and silenced by the hegemony of the upper caste. Kancha Iliah finds no difference between English textbooks and his vernacular textbooks. To quote him: “We do not share the contents of either; we do not find our lives reflected in their narratives. We cannot locate our family settings in them. In none of these books do we find words that are familiar to us” (Iliah 2007: 15).

Similarly, the Aboriginal people and their culture have also been represented by the whites with prejudice. Indigenous literature was basically an Oral literature and had never been documented. The documentation of their culture and history were initially done by and through the White people. This documentation was obviously prejudiced, controlled and manipulated. Sara Mills attributes this phenomenon to the innate power of colonialism:

Colonial power enables the production of knowledge, and it also maps out powerful positions from which to speak. The fact of being a colonial subject, a representative of the colonising power enhances one’s status as a knowing subject. Even subjects who would have been considered amateur ethnologists and archeologists were, because of the colonial context, considered to be experts on the colonized country. (2004: 103)

Commenting on the representations in literary texts, Sara Mills rightly observes:

Colonised people are dehumanized by generalisations made about them within colonial texts. The fact that sweeping generalisations were made about particular cultures made them less communities of individuals than an indistinguishable mass, about whom one could amass ‘knowledge’ or which could be stereotyped.... (2004: 97)

The history and culture of Aborigines were entirely altered by the vicious white authority. As precisely stated, the “colonised countries are often described in negative terms: the indigenous people were described as idle, weak, corrupt, their buildings were dirty, their culture a decaying version of a past grandeur” (Mills 2004: 101). The Indigenous Australians were, thus, deprived of their basic human rights to voice their own emotions, angst, values and beliefs and had been forced to depend on borrowed voices. Only in the last score of the twentieth century, the Aboriginals found their voice to express themselves. To quote Miller: “The history of white editorship of Aboriginal texts continued up to the 1980s and there is almost no text by an Aboriginal author from this period that doesn’t bear traces of white editing” (Miller 2009: 206). Thus both the Dalit and the Aboriginal literatures were almost effaced from the history.

Both the Dalit and Aboriginal literatures strive to detonate the concrete wall of hegemony and oppression and create an egalitarian society. Their widespread literary awakening and their attempt to rewrite their history have begun more or less during the same period – in the 1960s and the 70s. Though Ambedkar was considered as the precursor of Dalit Literature, it took its full-fledged form, in its modern sense only in the 1970s (Anand 2007: 1). As Heiss observes: “Apart from Unaipon’s work it is also generally accepted that Aboriginal written literature did not fully develop into a distinct genre until the 1970s, 80s and 90s” (Heiss). Only in the 1990s, there was much discussion “on the issue of non- Aboriginal writers writing about Aboriginal society and culture” and “the need to define authenticity in Aboriginal writing” was highlighted (Heiss). Both the Dalit and the Aboriginal writings expose the so far unexplored horizons in the literary, social, political and ethnographical studies. Pramod K. Nayar observes: “Aboriginal narrative has, as its nearest equivalent, Dalit writing from India ...” (Nayar 2009: 176). Both Dalit and Aboriginal literatures can be termed as protest literatures. In addition to giving expression to their vicissitudes, they verbalise their social awakening. According to Melissa Lucashenko, “Aboriginal writing to me at the moment is a protest literature ... it’s centered around land and social justice and legal stuff” (qtd. in Heiss). Likewise, as Alok Mukherjee points out in *Towards an Aesthetic*, the “representation of Dalit life” in Dalit writing, is

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not limited to an obsessive self-pitying narration of the misery and wretchedness of a people incapable of acting, as it is in much of the upper caste literature about Dalits. Dalits who people the texts of this literature may not be paragons of virtue, but they have life, they survive, struggle, and often succeed even though their Dalitness... never disappears. It is always – already there. It is this complex reality that constitutes the Dalits' authentic experience. (2004: 13)

Thus, the Dalits and the Aboriginals prove that they are not puppets in the hands of their oppressors but valiant fighters who can outwit the cruelties of life with stubborn endurance, through their literature. They declare that they are “no longer a people without history, much less the subalterns of society's history.... Here, they are the central figures of their own history, and from this history they derive the confidence and the right to assert their humanity” (2004: 15).

It is interesting to note that most of the Dalit literature and the Aboriginal literature are in the form of autobiographical writings. As Ravikumar in *Touchable Tales* aptly summarises:

The early writings of a newly literate community, or a group finding its voice for the first time, have always been autobiographical – be they aboriginal women, black or dalit. The aboriginal writers say that when their entire history is erased, the autobiographical stories they narrate become their history. (Anand 2007: 7)

Alok Mukherjee has also stated that a “great deal of Dalit literature is in the genre of life-writing” (2004: 12). Similarly, the Aboriginal Australians have profusely used autobiographical writings to verbalise their voices. To quote Grossman:

... life-writing has proved a particularly attractive genre for Indigenous Australians wishing to revision and rewrite historical accounts of invasion, settlement and cross – cultural relationships from individual, family and community-based Indigenous Australian memories, perspectives and experiences. (2009: 223).

2. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Dalit and Australian Aboriginal communities share a lot of identicalities in their history, predicament and prospects. To borrow the words of Alok Mukherjee, “there are many historical and experiential similarities” (qtd. in Anand 2007: 22) between the two communities and Dalit literature can very well be juxtaposed with Aboriginal literature.

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