CHAPTER 3

INDELIBILE HISTORY
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3.1 Introduction: Slave Memoirs

African-Americans and Dalits had experienced inhuman degradation and they struggled for human rights and against exploitation which lead them to liberation movements. Despite differences in race, nation, religion, language, society and conditions, the similarity in their experiences derives from the fact that both were targets of exploitation, injustice and slavery and thus their painful experience becomes global in nature. This sharing among the marginalized and subaltern groups strikes solidarity and their writings aggressively disclose their humiliation. They register their protest, contest neo-colonial structures, counter hegemonic narratives of liberation – and carnivalize them.

Maya Angelou’s inimitable sense of style and humour displays not only the strength, warmth and dignity as a woman writer but also her awareness of black identity, oppression, active participation in the liberation movements, self-esteem and self-image. The recurring themes in the works of Bama are the miseries of dalit women, poverty, oppression, exploitation, the present status of Dalit culture, their need to get social equality and the need to be self-confident and self-reliant. Both writers articulate the authentic self, transmutation and freedom at ontological level. The analysis of the works of Maya Angelou and Bama without properly contextualizing them in the matrix of their historical background, as black African American and Indian Dalit, is bound to be incomplete. The need for articulating their issues have created writers among
them who can authenticate the experiences of their respective races through their literary endeavours.

African-American history starts in the seventeenth century with indentured servitude in the American colonies and progresses on to the election of an African-American as the forty-forth and current President of the United states, Barack Obama. Between these landmarks, other events and issues both resolved and ongoing were faced by African-Americans. Slavery, reconstruction, development of African-American community, participation in the great military conflicts of the United States, racial segregation Civil Rights Movements, Harlan Renaissance, reclamation of black culture are some of the markers in the history of America. Black-Americans now form the single largest racial minority in the United States and form the second largest racial group after Whites.

The first recorded Africans in British North America arrived in 1619, August 20. Twenty men and women from Africa arrived on a slave ship and were sold in the first North American slave auction - by British and International custom, as ‘indentured servants’ who settled in Jamestown, Virginia. Africans could be held on servitude for life though white Christian indentured servants could only be held for a limited term. Transformation from indentured servitude to racial slavery happened gradually. Between 1619 and 1860, some 4,00000 blacks were transported from America to United States. Those Africans who found themselves in North America may be deemed to
have fared better than those who went elsewhere. There were no laws regarding slavery early in Virginia’s history. However by 1640, the Virginian courts had sentenced one black servant to slavery. In 1654, John Casor, a black man, became the first legally recognized slave in the United States. A court in Northampton County ruled against Casor, declaring his property for life ‘owned’ by a black colonist Anthony Johnson. It was in 1622 that Anthony Johnson, son of an African mother, who lived with his wife arrived in Virginia, and they eventually founded the first free black community in North America. The popular concept of race based slave system did not fully develop until the 1700s. Later the court rulings established the racial basis of the American incarnation of slavery to apply chiefly to Black Africans and people of African descent and occasionally to Native Americans. Slavery was one of the principle issues leading to the American Civil war. In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation declared that all slaves in States which had seceded from the Union were free. African-Americans quickly set up congregations for themselves as well as schools, community and civic associations to have space away from white control. While the post-war reconstruction era was initially a time of progress for African-Americans, in the late 1890s, Southern States enacted Jim Crow Laws to enforce racial segregation and disenfranchisement. To retain self-esteem and dignity, African-Americans continued to build their own schools, churches, banks, social clubs and other businesses. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, racial discriminatory laws, and racial violence
aimed at African-Americans began to increase. The desperate condition of African-Americans in the South that sparked the Great Migration of the early twentieth century combined with a growing African-American intellectual and cultural elite in the Northern United States, led to a movement against violence and discrimination that like abolitionism which preceded it, crossed racial lines. The Civil Rights Movement between the years 1954 and 1968 was directed at abolishing racial discrimination against blacks, particularly in the Southern U.S. The March in Washington for Jobs and Freedom and the condition which brought it into being were credited with putting pressure on the then presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson who followed. It was the undaunted support of Johnson which helped the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination in Public accommodations, employment and labour unions and the voting Rights Act of 1965 which expanded federal authority over states to ensure black political participation through protection of voter registration and elections. By 1966, the emergence of Black Power movement which lasted from 1966 to 1975 expanded upon the aims of the Civil Rights Movement to include economic and political self-sufficiency and freedom from white authority. In 2008, Democratic Senator Barack Obama defeated Republican Senator John Mc Cain to become the first Black American to be elected to the office of the President of the United States. 95% of the African American voters voted for Obama. He also received overwhelming support from young and educated Whites, a majority of Asians, Americans of the Hispanic origin and Native Americans. In the following year, Michael S.
Steele was selected the first African-American Chairman of the National Republic Party. The blacks proved that the fate of a slave is not to be a slave forever.

### 3.2 African Tribes, American Slaves

According to the Pulitzer Prize winning historian David Brion Davis and the historian Eugene Genovese, treatment of slaves was both harsh and inhuman. Slaves were punished for a variety of reasons – most of the time it was for working too slow, breaking a law such as running away, leaving the plantation without permission and not following orders given to them. Whites often punished slaves in front of others to make an example out of them. Slaves were punished with a variety of gadgets and instruments. They were whipped, placed in chains and shackles, put in contraptions such as metal collars, forced to walk tread mills and often hanged. The whip was the most common form of punishment performed on a slave. Slave overseers were authorized to whip and brutalize non-compliant slaves. When some Negroes determined to disobey and resist the White masters, they were killed. Female slaves were also whipped. They usually screamed and prayed though a few never made a sound. If the women were pregnant they often dug a hole for them to place their bellies in while being whipped. After the slaves were whipped they would be further tortured by bursting their blisters and rubbing the soars with turpentine and red pepper. Sometimes, after being beaten they would take a brick, grind it into a powder, mix it with lard and rub it all over them. Metal collars were also
common. Many collars were thick and heavy and they would often have protruding spikes which hassled the slaves while doing field work and preventing them from sleeping or lying down.

By law, slave owners could be fined for not punishing recaptured runaway slaves. Slave codes\(^1\) authorized, indemnified or even required the use of violence. To help regulate the relationship between slaves and owners, including legal support for keeping the slaves as property, slave codes were established. In the codes, a slave is defined as a human being who is by law deprived of his or her liberty for life and is the property of another. This code also stated that children of a slave shall share the condition of their mother. Thus, both slaves and even free blacks were regulated by these codes and had their movements monitored by slave patrols conscripted from the white population which were allowed to use summary punishment against escapees, sometimes maiming or killing them. In addition to physical abuse and murder, slaves were at constant risk of losing members of their families if these owners decided to trade them for profit, punishment or to pay debts. As the slaves were the legal properties of their masters, it was not unusual for enslaved black women to be raped by their owners, owner’s relatives or their friends. Children who resulted from such rapes were slaves as well because they took the status of their mothers unless freed by the slave holders. Robert Fogel, the economist, believed that slave breeding and sexual exploitation destroyed black families. He argues that the family was the basic unit of social organization. The slave owners encouraged the stability of the black or slave family due to economic
interest. But such exploitation only destroyed the black lineage. Most slave sales were either of whole family or of individual at an age when it would have been normal for them to leave the family. In many households, treatment of slaves varied with the skin colour of the slaves. Darker skinned servants worked in the fields while light skinned slaves were house servants who had comparatively better clothing, food and housing.

By breaking up existing families and forcing slaves to relocate far from everyone and everything, the white masters replicated many of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. Renowned historian Ira Berlin called this forced migration the Second Middle Passage, characterizing it as the central event in the life of a slave between the American Revolution and the Civil war. The massive deportation traumatized black people, both slave and the free. Slave traders had little interest in purchasing or transporting intact slave families, although interested in creating ‘self-producing’ labour force. Berlin wrote:

The internal slave trade became the largest enterprise in the South outside the plantation itself and probably the most advanced in its employment of modern transportation, finance and publicity. Some traders moved their chattels and were forced to walk (Berlin 172). Regular migration routes were established and were served by a network of slave pens, yards and warehouses needed as temporary housing for the slaves. Berlin summarizes the experiences of their migration thus:
The Second Middle passage was extraordinarily lonely, debilitating and dispiriting. Capturing the mournful character of one southward marching coffle, an observer characterized it as a procession of men, women and children resembling that of a funeral. Indeed with men and women dying on the march or being sold and resold became not merely commodified but cut off from nearly every human attachment (Berlin 176).

The blacks were tortured and tormented, dehumanized and degraded by the slave owners. Colonialism and slavery forced the oppressed to conceal their true self. Often the neurosis of self-doubt leads to self-denial and finally, culminates in withdrawal or suspension of the true self. The damage was colossal and total and forced the oppressed into a state of oblivion. Frantz Fanon views that “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying their brain of all forms and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 169).

But in spite of this victimization, the desire for freedom in them could not be beaten out of their system. Right from the beginning they revolted against direct slavery. They revolted on the ship when they were being taken to America; they revolted when they landed on the shores of America. The first recorded instance of organized slave resistance occurred on September 13, 1663 in Virginia. And the first actual insurrection took place in 1712 when the
slaves set fire to a building in New York City. In 1742, seven Negroes were executed for the murder of their master. Others were convicted for committing the act of sabotage, arson, stealing of property and the brutal treatment of livestock. In 1800, a planned attempt was made by Gabriel Prosser, supported by a thousand slaves, to destroy the town and their masters. The most dreadful of insurrections was spearheaded by Nat Turner, a preacher in Virginia, in August 21, 1831. With the goal of freeing himself and others, he killed approximately fifty men, women and children but was eventually subdued and hanged. Turner became a symbol of black rage and black freedom. After this incident, many blacks in other parts of the South also became inspired and attempted to form uprisings of their own. Throughout the Southern States, where slavery was rampant, slaves devised different methods of resisting hardships. Though most of them resorted to peaceful methods of resistance, they were ineffective in solving their issues.

Slave uprising ended up in making matters worse. As a result, the living conditions of the slaves worsened. As whites grew more fearsome of the slaves, they treated them with increased hostility and made stricter codes that governed their lives in an attempt to tame what they thought were dangerous and unruly savages. The slave codes robbed the African-Americans of their freedom and will power. Slaves were forbidden from carrying guns, taking food, striking their masters and running away. The slaves could be flogged or even killed for resisting or breaking the slave code. Freedom was always in the minds of the enslaved. The most common form of resistance was to run away. To live as a
run away required perfect escape routes and exact timing. For abolitionists this provided an opportunity to argue for immediate emancipation by threatening that the violence would continue unless all slaves were liberated.

From the 1750s, there was widespread sentiment during the American Revolution that slavery was a social evil for the country as a whole and for the Whites and that it should eventually be abolished. The Massachusetts’s Constitution of 1780 declared ‘all men born free and equal’. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, a movement to end slavery gained momentum in the United States. Slave holders opposed freedom for blacks but saw repatriation as a way of avoiding rebellions. After 1830, a religious movement led by William Lloyd Garrison declared slavery to be a personal sin and demanded the owners to repent immediately and start the process of emancipation. The movement was highly controversial and was a factor in causing the American Civil War.

The American Civil War which began in 1861 led to the end of chattel slavery in America. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 was a powerful move that promised freedom for slaves. Since the Emancipation Proclamation was based on the President’s war powers, it only included the territory held by confederates at the time. However, the Proclamation became a symbol of the Union’s growing commitment to add emancipation to the Union’s definition of liberty. Lincoln played a leading role in getting the Congress to vote for the 13th Amendment which made
emancipation universal and permanent. Enslaved African Americans did not wait for Lincoln’s action before escaping and seeking freedom behind union lines. Thousands of African-Americans escaped to Union controlled areas like Norfolk, the Hampton Roads region in 1862, Virginia, and Tennessee from 1862 onwards. Many African-Americans fled to Union lines where commanders created camps and schools for them, in which both adults and children learned to read and write. The American Missionary Association contributed to participate in the war effort by sending teachers to such contraband camps.

Women are half the human race and they are half of black history as well. The story of African-American women in these times is mostly of women without names which show lack of identity. Since black women find themselves in a double jeopardy of race and gender, they should be placed in the context of not only racial and colonial experience but also of the experience arising out of their femininity. But women seeking liberation must cease to be the victims; they become aggressive and march into the world of liberation to redirect their own destiny. They exercise their power as rebels because “Rebellion… breaks the seal and allows the whole being to come into play. It liberates stagnant waters and fers them into a raging torrent” (Camus 17).

Slave women’s days were filled with hard work. Most lived within the slave family but slaves were not allowed to legally marry. Black mothers often had to neglect their own children as they had to take care of White children.
But slaves living in towns had more freedom and could attend church. There was no law prohibiting owners from teaching slaves to read and write. Since the first slaves were taken from Africa in 1619, black women have been telling tales, singing songs and speaking out. But their voices were submerged in the din of slave trade. Women were quite active in the abolitionist movement. Black women spoke from their experience to reach out to the audience and to elicit their empathy and response. As early as 1746, Lucy Terry, a black wrote the first known poem ‘Bar Fight’ but it was not published until after Phyllis Wheatly’s poems. In 1829, Sarah Moore published her anti-slavery letter ‘Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States’. She was an active abolitionist and women’s right proponent. The female anti-slavery society was founded in 1832. While working on plantations and farms, women and men had equal labour. In 1837, an Anti-slavery convention of American women met in New York City in which both black and white women participated. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had first met at the convention and realized the need for a separate women’s rights movement. During the Massachusetts Anti-slavery Society meeting, which Stanton and Winslow, another black activist, attended, the hosts refused to seat the women delegates. This resulted in a Convention of their own to form a Society to advocate the rights of women. In 1848 at Seneca Fall, New York, Stanton and Winslow launched the women rights movement which became one of the most diverse and social forces in American life. Two most famous black women abolitionists, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, wrote about their traumatic experiences as slaves and
their concept about freedom. Frances Ellen, Watkins Harper, and Maria Steward also are worth mentioning as significant black writers and activists of the time.

As the Civil War ended, slaves were freed and the lives of African Americans were changing. In 1865, chattel slavery ended in the United States with the passing of the 13th amendment to the Constitution. Harriet Beecher Stowe did wonders for the Anti-slavery Movement. Through her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which was serialized and published in ‘The National Era’, a weekly newspaper, the world community knew about the cruel and inhuman treatment of enslaved Blacks in America. Black woman have never been totally subservient within the black community. Black women and men stood together in the common fight against racial oppression and economic exploitation. The struggle for women’s equality in the black community has been quantitatively different from the struggle of white women: “If the fifteenth century discovered America to the old world, the nineteenth century is discovering women to her” wrote Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in 1892 (Bert 2). This perspective of the black woman, like others in the United States, was unswervingly devoted to the black cause and to the cause of women, irrespective of colour differences. The bondage of chattel slavery for one sector of American womanhood was compounded by bondage. All women in America were encumbered by a cultural tradition of inferiority and a social condition of second class citizenship.
After the civil war, the very word emancipation was an incantation to black womanhood. It was at once symbolic, reverent and compelling. Emancipation meant the tireless quest for ideals, liberation from serfdom of whatever kind, freedom for women as people. “To be alive,” exalted Anna Julia Cooper, “at such an epoch is a privilege to be a woman’ (142). Black women addressed mankind – specifically all Americans - about America, its issues, its evils and its meanings. Black women were important carriers of black culture. They transmitted its message in the haunting music and inspiring lyrics of folk songs and the homely maxims of folk wisdom. They interpreted the anxieties of present life against the background of theology and heralded the future in the liturgy of fervent belief.

Diaries, letters, autobiographies, speeches and interviews, essays and reportage were part of evidence for understanding the lives of black women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If individuals wrote, their writings which testify the patterns of lives they had were seldom salvaged. The debates and tensions over the issue of gender equality were inevitably influenced by the women’s liberation movement. They evolved their own agenda for equality within the framework of the black freedom struggle. They believed that only when black women were able to proclaim free would the entire race be truly liberated.
3.2.1 Harlem Renaissance

Harlem Renaissance was originally called the New Negro Movement. It grew out of the changes that had taken place in the Negro-American community since the abolition of slavery. Harlem in New York City became a Negro neighbourhood in the early 1900s. In 1910, a large block along 135th street and Fifth Avenue was bought by various African-American realtors and a church group. Due to war, the migration of labourers from Europe virtually ceased because the war caused a massive demand for unskilled industrial labourers. The great migration brought African-Americans to cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland and New York City. It expanded the black community creating a greater market for Negro culture and music like Jazz and Blues. Thus the Negro songs of the South also migrated to the North and were played in the night clubs and the hot spots of Harlem. At the same time whites also were becoming increasingly fascinated by black culture. The black community was able to seize upon its first chance for group expression and individual attention. The first stage of Harlem Renaissance started in the late 1910s. With racism still rampant and economic opportunities scarce, creative expression was one of the few avenues available to African Americans. 1971 saw the premier of three plays written by white playwright Ridgeley Torrance featuring Negro’s complex human emotions and yearnings. James Weldon Johnson called the premiers of these plays the most important single event in the entire history of the blacks in the American theatre. In 1919, Claude McKay published his militant sonnet ‘If We must Die’. According to the critic Alain Locke, there
was a transformation from social disillusionment to racial pride. By the end of the 1st World War, the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were describing the reality of contemporary Negro life in America. The genre of jazz music blossomed during 1920s and became popular not only with the citizens of Harlem but also on the national and International level. Whites who were carried away by the culture and music started exploring them in their works of art too.

The Harlem Renaissance was characterized by an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who through intellect and production of literature, art and music could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics and racial social integration. Some of the common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were the influence of the experience of slavery and emerging African American folk traditions based on black identity, the effects of institutional racism, the dilemma inherent in performing and writing for elite white audience, the difficulty of conveying the experience of modern black life in the urban North etc. The slave narrative was intended to do much more than narrate a history of injustice. It was a declaration of literary and social independence. It was simultaneously an assertion of selfhood and a set of political propositions. The narrator changes the passive into active. Black writers were not blind to the debilitating nature of the physical environment but they chose to emphasize the complex cultural resources of a black community in the process of creating its own values, images and myths.
Harlem Renaissance offered more opportunities for the black to be published by mainstream publishers. The new fiction attracted a great amount of attention from the nation at large. Jean Toomer, Jessie Faucet, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Eric D. Walrond and Langston Hughes became national figures. The Harlem Renaissance helped lay the foundation for the post World war II phase of the Civil Rights Movements. Many black artists who rose to creative maturity afterwards were inspired by this literary movement. The Renaissance was more than a literary or artistic movement for it intended a certain sociological development particularly through a new racial consciousness – through racial integration as seen in the ‘Back to Africa’ movement led by Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of ‘two ness’ introduced in ‘The Souls of Black Folk’ (1903) which explored a divided awareness of one’s identity as a unique critique of the social ramifications of social consciousness.

The progress during this period – both symbolic and real – became a point of reference from which the African-American community gained a spirit of self-determination that provided a growing sense of Black urbanity and Black militancy as well as foundation for the community to build upon for the Civil Rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. The urban setting of rapidly developing Harlem provided a venue for African Americans from all backgrounds to appreciate the variety of Black life and culture. Through this expression the Harlem Renaissance encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture which provided rich sources for artistic and intellectual
imagination. It freed the blacks from the establishment of past condition and through sharing in the cultural experience, a united racial identity evolved.

Black owned magazines and newspapers flourished freeing African Americans from the constricting influence of main stream White society. Charles S. Johnson’s ‘Opportunity’ magazine became the leading voice of black culture. W.E.B. DuBois’ journal ‘The Crisis’ provided a platform for littérates like Anna Bontemps, Langston Huges and Countee Cullen. The other luminaries of the period included Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Mckay, Jean Toomer, Rudoff Fisher, Wallance Thuman and Nella Larsen. Harlem Renaissance was successful in that it brought the black experience clearly within the corpus of American cultural history. Not only through an explosion of culture, but on a sociological level, is the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance that it redefined how America and the world viewed the African-American population. The migration of blacks from the South to the North transformed the image of the African-Americans from rural, undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness and the African-Americans became world famous, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally.

The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience. The literature of the African-Americans appealed to both the blacks and the whites. The musicians and other performers also played to mixed audience. Artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance echoed the American progressivism in
its faith, in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change and in its almost uncritical belief in itself and its future. Great Depression rendered a rude shock to Black intellectuals just as their White counterparts and the Harlem Renaissance ended abruptly because of naïve assumptions about the centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities.

The great social and cultural changes accelerated the pace of black literature, art and culture during the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the decline of the great era, many of its ideas lived much longer. It was in Harlem that Amiri Baraka, the writer and activist, started the Black Art Movement which bore the torch for furthering the goals. It inspired the black people to establish their own publishing houses, magazines, journals and art institutions. The movement was triggered by the assassination of Malcolm X, the black revolutionist of Africa. Following the assassination of Malcolm X, Baraka moved from Manhattan to Harlem. Although Baraka moved uptown to establish the Black Art Repertory Theatre or school, the Black Arts Movement grew out of a changing political and cultural climate. Black Art Movement influenced the world of literature portraying different ethnic voices. Before the movement, the literary canon was lacking in articulations and was unable to express ideas from the point of view of racial and ethnic minorities. The movement which lasted for about a decade was a period of controversy and change. African-Americans became a greater presence not only in the field of literature but in all areas of arts and established that they had come to stay in the field of art and literature.
Theatre groups, poetry performances, music and dance were centered on this movement. African Americans were also able to educate about their cultural difference to others through different types of expressions and media. The most common form of teaching was through poetry reading. African-American performances were used for their own political advertisement, organization and community issues. The first major art movement publication was in 1964. Black poetry readings allowed them to use vernacular dialogues. Well-known writers involved in this movement include Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou and Rosa Grey.

The Black writers formed the Harlem Writers Guild in 1950, led by John O. Killens which included Maya Angelou, Jean Carey Bond, Sarah Wright and many others. But the Harlem Writers Guild focused on prose, primarily fiction, which did not have the mass appeal of poetry performed in the dynamic vernacular of the time. The purpose of Harlem Writers Guild then and now is to develop and aid in the publication of works by writers of the African Diaspora. Major journals contributed by the members included ‘The Liberator’, ‘The Crisis’, ‘Black Scholar’ and ‘Freedom Ways’.

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of and in response to the Black Liberation Movement and The Women’s Movement. In an effort to meet the needs of black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in The Women’s Movement and sexually oppressed in ‘Black Liberation Movement’, formed the Black Feminist Movement. ‘Black’ was equated with black men
and ‘woman’ was equated with White women. As a result, black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop a theory which could adequately address the way race, gender and class were interconnected in their lives and to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

References date back to the Nineteenth Century when African-American women like Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sojourner Truth challenged the conventions and mores of their era to speak publicly against slavery and in support of black women’s rights. These African-American women did not refer to themselves as feminists, however, their beliefs and activism ignited a tradition of anti-racist and anti sexist political movement and thought which is now defined as black American feminism. Many Black-American women inspired by these Nineteenth Century trailblazers have continued over the years to work towards the eradication of race and gender inequality and other systems of oppression, which have historically subjugated Black-American women.

Black-Feminist organizations emerged during the 1970s and faced many difficulties from both the culture they were confronting and the adjustment to their vulnerability within it. The women also fought against suppression from the larger movements in which many of its members came from. Black feminist organization had to overcome three different challenges that no other feminist organizations had to face. The first that these women faced was to
prove to other black women that feminism was not only for white women, secondly they had to demand that white women share power with them and affirm diversity, thirdly they had to fight the misogynist tendencies of Black Nationalism. The National Black Feminist Organization was founded in 1973. The Organization focused on the interconnectedness of the many prejudices that faced African-American women such as racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and lesbophobia. Unfortunately, this active organization stopped operating nationally in 1977.

Many black men in the Black Liberation Movement were interested in controlling black woman’s sexuality. Bell Hooks said that during the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, black men over-emphasized white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of interracial relationships. Again, part of freedom and manhood was the right of men to have indiscriminate access to and control over any woman’s body. Moreover, the black men in the Black Liberation Movement often made sexist statements which were largely accepted without criticism. Amiri Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature, and that there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other; hence the black man is not ‘for’ his woman as a black woman is ‘for’ her man. The two do not submit to one another, rather the woman submits to her black man. This attitude of Baraka shows the disregard for the humanity and equality for black women.
Thus faced with sexism of black men and the racism of white women, black women in their respective movements had only two choices. Either they could remain in the movements and try to educate the non-black and non-female comrades about their needs or they would form a movement of their own. When there was a diversion of a movement of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought, the women decided to forge their own movement of Black Feminist Movement. Alice Walker coined the term ‘Womanist’ to describe the Black Feminist Movement. The term is derived from the Black Vernacular ‘Womanish’ – a black feminist or feminist of colour. Walker suggests solidarity with the human race as a whole to understand black feminism and comments, “A Womanist is a black feminist who is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker 82). The definition is both affirming and challenging for it recommends a woman’s stretching of her personal boundaries while at the same time calls on women to maintain their connections with the rest of humanity. Thus it universalizes individual struggles when Walker redefined all people as people of colour. Yet, the scope for autonomous self-determination is also offered here.

Alice Walker and other womanists pointed out that black woman experienced a different and more intense kind of oppression from that of white women. Patricia Hill Collins defined that women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society. Black feminists contend that the liberation of
black women entail freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism and class oppression. There is a long standing important alliance between post-colonial feminists which overlaps with transnational feminism, third world feminism and black feminism. They have struggled for recognition, not only from men in their own culture but also from Western feminists. Mary Ann Weathers states her belief that women’s liberation should be considered as a strategy for a tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men and children. But she posits that:

All women suffer oppression, even white women particularly poor white women and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black-American women whose oppression is tripled. But we do have female oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary forces we are now beginning to amass (Weathers 16).

From the anti slavery and women’s right movement of the nineteenth century, continuing through the Black and women’s Right movement of 1960s and 1970s up to today’s contemporary Black Feminist activism, Black-American women have sought to have a voice in two centuries of liberation struggles that had silenced or ostracized them. Whether they chose to use the term black feminism, African-American feminism, womanism or Black-American Feminism, they articulated the complexity of Black-American woman’s
demand for social, economic and political equality, and a desire for a compatible and progressive vision of social justice imparted to the oppressive Black-American women.

3.2.2 Black Women Writings

Black women writings confront oppression in an astute and critical way on the basis of deeply felt human needs and desires. Black feminists are concerned with the following women’s right issues and issues of racism:

1. A major point in the Black feminist agenda was reclaiming tradition. This involves

i) Discovering, reinterpreting and analyzing the works of Black women intellectuals for the first time. Alice Walker’s retrieval of Zora Neale Hurston’s contribution to the Black feminist movement is a good example.

ii) New interpretations of existing works through new theoretical frameworks. Hazel Carby’s work on Nineteenth century Black women novelists prove this.

iii) Redefining the role of Black woman intellectual, based on certain criteria and assumptions: the experiences of African-American women give them a unique stand inaccessible to other groups. They thus (a) provide insights into their oppressive conditions, (b) provide a leadership for black women’s empowerment and resistance, and (c) create group autonomy.

2. Black feminist thought may be defined as ‘specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for black
women’, states Collins in ‘Black Feminist Thought’ (289). This standpoint includes the presence of certain core themes, the diversity of Black woman’s experiences in encountering these core themes, the varied experiences of black woman’s Afro centric feminist consciousness, the interdependence of Black women’s experiences, consciousness and actions. It seeks to empower Black woman for political activism.

3. There is a strong and recurring humanist vision that informs black feminist thought. This solidarity with the human race as a whole is crucial to understand Black feminism.

4. The central themes addressed in Black Feminism are:

i) The class aspect of the black women’s life like family, work and oppression.

ii) The mammys, matriarchs and other such stereotypes where black woman becomes the ‘other’. Mammy symbolizes the dominant groups’ perceptions of the ideal black female, where she is a faithful, obedient servant. The matriarch is the white culture’s symbol of what is wrong with black families. The aggressive, assertive and working black women who support their families economically are dismissed as matriarchs. She is the stereotype of the whore, where she symbolizes the sexually aggressive one who helps justify the controls imposed upon the black woman’s sexuality by the white male.

iii) Self definition: The need to find a voice to attain visibility and resist objectification as the perpetual ‘other’. This suggests a culture of resistance. To make this possible, the community of black women evolves as a close-knit
group at three safe places – informal friendship and family interactions, Black churches and Black women’s organizations.

iv) Motherhood: This can be seen as a mode of self-expression as corrective to the stereotyping. The woman-centered networks of blood mothers, and foster mothers are important as an intense emotion is involved especially between the blood mothers and daughters. Political activism and organization of women’s networks play an important role in community rearing or caring of children. Thus ‘individual separateness’ is rejected in favour of interconnectedness.

v) Activism has two dimensions - a struggle by black women for group survival which creates black female spheres of influence, and the struggle for institutional transformation.

vi) Sexual politics in black writing or black lesbianism which considers heterosexism as moot point, which causes women’s oppression. Lesbian feminists were twice victimized – for being women and being homosexuals.

vii) The black woman’s relationships – the abuse of black women by black men. With the assimilation of Eurocentric ideologies of the gender differences and the stereotypes of the black women, the black men also objectify the black women.

In contemporary literature, fiction occupies the most important position as it catches on the contemporary reality more effectively than any other genre can. Black women writers began to create theories and developed a new movement which spoke about the combination of problems they were battling
including sexism, racism and classism. History also verifies that Black women have rejected doormat status for centuries whether imposed racially or sexually. From the time of slavery, black women’s resistance has been documented and continues to the present time. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, poets like Frances E.W. Harper (1825-1911), Angelina Weld Grimke’ (1880-1958), Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875-1935), Anne Spencer (1882-1975), and Georgia Douglous Johnson (1886-1966) addressed themes of sexual as well as racial identity in their works.

Paule Marshall stands out as a pioneer of the black women’s renaissance. She is the first black woman writer who treated the major themes like history, colonialism, slavery and racism from a black feminist point of view. Her first novel ‘Brown Girl, Brown Stones’ which appeared in 1959 forged a path for the black woman writers who were to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. What Paul Marshall announced as early as 1959 were, a decade later, incorporated into the fictional canon of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Maya Angelou and others. Toni Morrison was the first African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In her novels, she focuses on the experiences of Black-Americans, particularly emphasizing black woman’s experience in an unjust society and her search for cultural identity. She uses fantasy and mystic elements along with realistic depiction of racial, gender and class conflict. Her first novel was *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to be followed by other novels like *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1971), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) and
Alice Walker, another widely acclaimed major writer authored *Colour Purple* (1982), where there is a negative portrayal of men. *The Temple of my Familiar* (1989), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) followed. The themes she dealt with were the issues of female circumcision in Africa which depicts vividly sexism, racism and poverty that make life often a struggle. She portrays the strengths of family, community, self-worth and spirituality too. Maya Angelou, the unforgettable writer like these great writers, comments on the life of Black-Americans and their culture in her autobiographical volumes. They become involuntary outpourings about the racial, emotional, and psychological problems confronting the doubly depraved, black female in the andro-centric America.

The fangs of racism have placed human beings in a state of submission and conformity. The enslaved defines the contours of their identity not in relation to themselves alone but in relation to the oppressor and their value system. They are thus alienated from their true self-esteem and self respect and suffer from feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. Blacks undergo different measures of slavery while the White world celebrates the declaration of the abolition of slavery. The oppressed are forced to renounce their cultural or racial identity and those who adopt the hegemonic mandates remain in a suspended position. The internalized mindset created by the oppressor made the oppressed to consider their culture, race and tradition to be inferior. But in the post-colonial situation, the subjugated race is slowly awakening from the cultural unconsciousness. The voice of the black, especially of the black
woman, has become more audible. They write to deconstruct the negative stereotypes surrounding their culture and more importantly they struggle for literary recognition from the oppressive dominant literary canon.

3.3 Indian Natives, Insulted Outcasts

Racism practiced in the western part of the globe is akin to casteism on the oriental side. Untouchability and exploitation practised in India oppress and humiliate the indigenous people of our country, who designate themselves as Dalits. When Africans were captured and transplanted into an alien country and culture, they were subjected to submission, but the dalits were branded as untouchables and slavery was imposed on them in their own motherland. Now, dalits are an important political and social force in India. Their literary and critical writings constitute a major challenge to the theories about Indian politics, society, culture and literature by intellectuals from upper castes. Dalit writers insist on having a particular purpose and audience in their writings and that these have an important bearing on their literary or aesthetic decisions and hence their work should not be assessed by universal criteria, which in India carry the markers of caste and class. Sharankumar Limbale characterizes Dalit literature as ‘purposive’ and describes its purpose variously as ‘revolutionary’, ‘transformational’ and ‘liberatory’. Dalit literature is the representation of dalit reality. Through this representation, the untouchable ‘other’ articulates loudly across the caste line and destroys the vaunted purity of the savarna space.
Perhaps the central purpose of Dalit literature is to enable the development of a new consciousness and identity among dalits.

There is no universally accepted theory about the origin of the Indian caste system. Researchers believe that the Indo-Aryans entered India from the North east and may have established a caste system, in which they placed themselves primarily in higher castes. According to Manu Dharma, the Hindu religious code of conduct divides human persons into four varnas (varna means colour or caste) - the four major varnas being the Brahmins (teachers, scholars and priests), the Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), the Vaishyas (trades) and Sudras (the agriculturists, servants and some artisan groups). Offspring of different varnas belong to different ‘jatis’. Another group excluded from the main society is called Parjanya or Antyaja. This group forms the untouchables, considered to be a lower section of Sudras. A person is born into a caste and once born in it his status is predetermined and immutable.

Certain myths and beliefs prevail regarding the origin of the caste system. It is believed that the Brahmins, the priestly class, came from the head of god. They alone are eligible for learning, teaching and for performing sacrifices. The Kshatriyas, the warrior class, came from the shoulder of God. Their duty is to protect people by waging wars against enemies. They are eligible for learning. The Vaishyas, the trading class, came from the thigh of God. Their work is to trade and feed the above two classes. The Sudras, the servants, came form the feet of God, and they are directed to do all menial jobs
for the above three classes. They are not entitled to anything. The four castes eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 sub-castes, with the untouchables at the bottom of the list or even outside it. They form the slaves of the other groups and are absolutely forbidden to learn and teach.

Dalits are deprived of education, right to possess assets and weapons to protect them. They are considered to be the property of the upper caste people. The code of conduct that deprives them of these rights was written three thousand years ago. Although untouchability was abolished by law in India, the dalits still experience its repercussions in all walks of life – social, economic and political.

The word ‘dalit’ has its origin in Sanskrit, meaning ground, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. It was first used by Jyothish Phule in the nineteenth century in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile ‘untouchable castes of the twice-born Hindus’. The definition of dalit implies that they were of one community before they were broken, they were together before they were scattered, and they were free people before they were oppressed. It also implies that there must have been an agent or an instrument by whom or by which these free people were subjugated and oppressed. Thus it could also be implied that the starting point of dalit history is the moment when the breaking, scattering and oppression of the dalits began or when exactly the dalits began to be treated as degraded human beings and when exactly they lost their identity. Dalits, Das, Chandala, Avarna, and Panchama were the terms
used in literature to denote them. They were reduced by their oppressors to a non-human level with no identity or dignity. Certain literary evidences are noted below:

(i) Rig Veda (1500 - 1000 BC): The earliest available literary source is Rig Veda. Its Purusha Sukta hymn talks about the origin of the four varnas, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The dalits find no place in it under the grouping but they are referred to as Avarna, Dasa and Dasyus (6th or 10th Mandala).

(ii) Upanishads (800 – 600 BC): By the time the Upanishads came into existence, the problem of the dalits was becoming deeper and clearer. The famous Chandogya Upanishad not only refers to the first three upper classes but also compares chandala (outcasts) with a dog and a swine (ref. Chandogya Upanishad, Khanda 10 verse 7).

(iii) Ramayana: In the time of Rama’s rule, only the three upper castes were allowed to do ‘tapasya’ (penance and meditation) but when a Sudra undertook penance in order to attain divinity (dignity), Rama killed the Sudra for such presumption.

(iv) Mahabharata: It delineates the degraded status of the dalits. It tells a story of the indigenous Ekalavya, who had to stake his right thumb for his expertise in archery and for being a better fighter than Arjuna of the upper caste. Dalit status has often been associated with occupation which is regarded as ritually impure such as removal of rubbish, removal of waste and leather work. They
work as manual labourers, cleaning latrines and sewers and clearing away human excreta. As a result they were commonly segregated, and they suffered from severe economic disabilities.

Gandhi ji coined the word Harijans meaning ‘Children of God’ as a mark of respectfully identifying the untouchables. The terms ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ are the official terms used in Indian Government documents to identify the untouchables and tribes. However in 2008, the National Commission for scheduled castes, noticing that Dalit – a self designated word - was used interchangeably with the ‘scheduled castes’, called the term ‘unconstitutional’ and asked the state governments to end its use. Adi Dravida, Adi Karnataka and Adi Andhra are words used in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh respectively to identify the untouchables in their official documents.

Dalits have voiced their dissatisfaction against the unequal social order through writings. The experiences articulated by the dalit writes have not been expressed in any other literature. Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by dalits. There are many theories about the origin of Dalit Literature. The Buddha (6th Century B.C.), Chokhamela (14th Century AD), Mahatma Phule (1828-90), and Prof. S.M. Mate (1886-1957) are variously held to be its originators. Although it is true that these great men were deeply concerned about the plight of the untouchables, history shows that
it was Dr. Ambedkar who was the pioneer of Dalit Literature. It is believed that one of the first dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an Eleventh Century cobbler-saint, who lived during the reign of western Chalukyas and who is also regarded by some scholars as the ‘father of Vachana poetry’. In the modern era, dalit literature received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar in Maharashtra, who brought forth the issues of dalits through their works and writings. This started a new trend in dalit writing in Marathi, Hindi, Tamil and Punjabi.

The anguish expressed in Dalit Literature is not that of an individual but of the entire outcast society and thus it assumes a social character. Dalit literature expresses rejection of unequal order and demands equality, liberty, fraternity and justice, and there is revolt in their writings to overcome the anguish and rejection. The experiences conveyed in Dalit Literature constitute an engagement in self-search to achieve self-respect and the rejection of traditions and a religion that are opposed to such self-respect. The dalit consciousness is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle against the caste system and discrimination where the human beings are its focus. This consciousness forms the important matrix of dalit literature which demarcates it from other literatures. Dalit writers write with social commitment, and the staunch belief that society may change and understand its problems. Arjun Dangle, the editor of Poisoned Bread which is a collection of dalit discourses, writes, “Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with a
movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people” (266). Bharti talks about dalit aesthetics thus:

The aim of dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life (11).

Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and negativism, as it is intimately linked with hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as ‘untouchables’, are unfortunate victimized bunches of social, economic and cultural inequality. Dalit literary movement is therefore just not a literary movement but the logo of change and revolution where the primary aim is the liberation of dalits. Dalit literary tradition has a long history which ideally unfolds the secret struggles against casteist tradition. The history of dalit literary movement could be traced from the Eleventh Century to the first vachana poet, Chennaia. In the Twelfth Century, the Dalit poet Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words:

Those who eat goats, foul and tiny fish,
Such they call caste people,
Those who eat the sacred cow
That showers frothing milk for Shiva,
Such, they call out-castes. (Rode 81)
Though the history of Dalit literary movement is centuries old, the movement sprouted out formally as an immediate effect of the historical movement called the ‘Little Magazine Movement.’ It was a type of seditious expression against the establishment of the educated youth of those days. The dalit youths gained motivation from the ‘Black Movements’ of America. Their literature ‘Black Panther’ became the role model for the dalits. The protest against the establishment of the dalits gained the very first expression in Dalit Literature. Exposing the oppressive condition of the dalits, the age-old questions of dalit identity was also addressed. Dalit literary movement began in an unorganized way but soon it gained pace with the active support of leaders like Dr. B.R Ambedkar. It was no coincidence that the dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra, the birth place of Dr. Ambedkar. History bears witness that it was Dr. Ambedkar who is still esteemed as the pioneer of Dalit Literature. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this consciousness.

Dalit literary movement which had begun without a bang faded gradually without anybody taking heed to the cry of sensitive response. In 1970, the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra began to egress forth only to champion the cause of dalits in creative interests and hobbies for writers like Nandeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale. The Panther Movement had borrowed its moral support from the writings of Dr. Ambedkar who was firm in his accentuation that the root cause of untouchability lies in a pronounced cultural
or racial difference of contempt and hatred coupled with a close dependence of the inferior society on the superior one. The term ‘Dalit Literature’ owes its first trace to the first dalit literary conference in 1958 which had passed a motion defining the exact term. However, this conference had passed off almost unnoticed, thus confirming that the dalit class was indeed facing desertion. In the Sixties, the Dalit literary movement was a decisive and crucial factor with several changes happening in Marathi literature. For the first time, a poet Narayan Surve penned about the quandary of workers. The Little Magazine Movement, yet another inherent pressure group activity for dalit movement, made its acquaintance with the concept of ‘Angry Young Man’ in the recovering Indian populace from the Shadow of Indian Independence and its ensuing partition. In Dalit Literature, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were already established, but the dalit literary movement gained colossal momentum from the short stories of Baburao Bagul. His collection of stories, ‘Jehva Mee Jaat Chorli Hoti’ (when I had concealed my caste) created such undulating reverberation in the Marathi Literary world that a group of critics hailed it as the epic of the dalits, while others compared it to the ‘Jazz Music’ of the Blacks. Baburao Bagul’s stories had taught dalit writers to give creative rendition to their experiences and feelings.

With the gradual passage of time and advancement of the Indian Judiciary and Administration, it was established that dalit would no longer be notified merely as an insignificant community with little or no cultural history. Instead they had sprung up to exhibit their prominence in the cultural, social
and literary scenario. The emergence of the dalit literary movement in Telugu is intimately associated with the rise of the dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh. The developing process of mass killing or genocide of dalits in Andhra Pradesh began with the infamous Karam Chedu massacre in 1985. Later, several other appalling and horrifying barbarities followed in 1980 and 1990s. The backward caste reservation movement in 1986 and the Pro mandal agitation in 1990 provided a background for fuller debate on contemporaneous forms of caste at the national level.

A substantial development in the contemporary Tamil literary scene was the emergence of yet another dalit literary movement by the turn of 1990s. Its coming into complete formation had coincided with the birth centenary of Dr. Ambedkar and the anti-mandal agitation. Dalit literary penning in Tamil, in spite of its deferential emergence, when placed side by side with Marathi and Kannada literature, had boomed all through the 1990s and challenged many of the virtuous righteousness of Tamil literary culture, overshadowed for long by the upper stratum of society. Though initially criticism provided the required vanguard to the Dalit literary movement, dalit creative writers have since asserted themselves in a majestic manner.

The idiom ‘dalit’ represents a political identity rather than just a caste name. Before this term originated, they had to endure the stigma associated with the patronizing names, imposed on them by upper caste people. These include ‘Pariah’, ‘Untouchable’ and even ‘Harijan’ coined by Gandhiji, which
had negative connotations. It is the term ‘dalit’ which exactly represents their struggle for humanity. This precise idea of identity is the nucleus of the Dalit movement which aims to raze down the caste system and earn for dalits the rights and freedom they deserve. While making significant strides on the literary platform, Dalit literary movement also had important socio-cultural responsibilities like portraying the dreams, ambitions, angst and afflictions of thousands of hapless Dalits. Many dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki, M.D Naimishray and Bandhu Madhav whole-heartedly participated in and endeavored to become part of the dalit literary movement, identifying themselves with pride as dalits. While the dalit movement emerged in response to dalit oppression, much remains to be fulfilled. Dalit discourses not only portray the hostile circumstances in which dalits live, but also articulate their struggle for emancipation from caste oppression. This provides a hope of breathing away from their inferior status, but true liberation for dalits is possible not just by demanding for equality and justice but only by bringing transformation in the society where others also acknowledge their human identity with respect and dignity. In the article ‘Past, Present and Future of Dalit Literature’, Arjun Dangle writes, “The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society changes and as long as exploitation exists” (216).

The catch phrase ‘Black is Beautiful’, coined in 1960s during the American Civil Rights Movement by the members of the ‘Black Panthers’, has been revived by the Dalits in India. Nandeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and J.V.
Pawar took the initiative in this regard and established a political movement called ‘Dalit Panthers’ in Bombay in 1972. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers and thus a wave of writing describing the dalit experience in provocative language swept over Marathi literature. This was probably considered to be the first formed organization by creative writers who also became politically active. This phenomenon of growing black power in India was a surprise to many due to the fact that very few people realise that after Africa India holds the second large black population in the world. Liberation of oppressed people is a global struggle and liberation movements proclaim rights of equality, freedom, and liberty inherent to all human beings which are indeed deserved by the marginalized too. Therein, the black consciousness movement headed by Steve Biko and the Dalit Panther Movement influenced by philosophies of Dr. Ambedkar created a collective liberation strategy for empowerment of coloured people across the globe. This realization is captured in the response of the oppressed to the oppressor, where the rhetoric of revolution spans from consciousness raising to violent action and has been utilized as a strategy for liberation. According to Rajshekar, the dalits are the descendents of the Africans who founded the Indus Valley Civilization and who were enslaved by fair skinned Aryans from the North. He states that the separation of the struggle of African-Americans in the United States from other people of African descent in the diaspora is deleterious to the collective uplift of a people. Rajshekar also speaks of the similarity between Dalit and African Americans.
While feeling free to pronounce on human rights issues in relation to other countries, both India and United States strongly reject any outside interference on their own minority relations. Both multi-ethnic states promote the ideal of non-violence with their oppressive minorities while not hesitating to resort to violence either in relations with other states or in repression of minority demands. And lastly and most perniciously, both seek to imply that the oppressive minority’s current plight is due, in some way, to its own misdeeds (Rajshekar 5). Dalit critics Paswan and Jaideva suggest that the level of oppression suffered by dalits is greater than the enslaved Africans in America or enslavement in Europe because in other places, they were “better placed in terms of certain minimum access to civilized life such as education and training” (Paswan 15).

3.3.1. Dalit Women Writings

The specificities of dalit women in India is seen to constitute the lower segment of Indian society and suffer from dual disadvantage (a) of being dalit; i.e., due to socio-economic and cultural marginalization (b) of being women; i.e., suffering from gender based inequalities and subordination. Early social reformers were concerned with two major problems – the emancipation of women and the amelioration of the condition of depressed classes. Their first efforts were directed towards demolishing certain customs like sati, prohibition against widow marriage, female infanticide etc. Issues related to the lower caste women who were being marginalized by the new land legislation and exposed
to the threat of sexual violence under the zamindari system and the distressing sale of women following the new land settlement were absent in these debates. Caste bondage had gender specifications and specific caste biased atrocities against Dalit women were not discussed overtly.

From 1927, dalit women have been actively participating in the social, cultural and political strategies of the dalit movement. Dalit women see their liberation as associated to the abolition of caste oppression. Such a conception of liberation is based on the community and not individual, since dalit women form part of the community. They do not feel personally or individually insecure because they are as much bread winners as the males. Dalit women do not look upon their husbands as ‘protectors’ and ‘providers’ and, in this sense, they stand taller than their male counterparts in the family. Dalit women being a part of a larger movement, their struggle becomes everyday practice from which will emerge a new society.

Dalit women had actively participated in the Ambedkar-led section of the freedom movement in the pre-independence period. They were in the forefront whether it was the Mahad Satyagraha, the Kalaram or Mukhed of Ambadevi Satyagraha. Women were more active than men in popularizing the concept of ‘Dhamma’² of Ambedkar. Vidyut Bhagwat states:

By using the term dalit women we are trying to say that if women from dalit castes and of dalit consciousness create a space for themselves for fearless expression, i.e., if they become subjects or
agent or self, they will provide a new leadership to Indian society in general and to feminist and dalit movements in particular (2).

Dalit movement as a new social movement expressed itself through radical literature and action. But even this upsurge did not give vent to the mute voices of dalit women in rural or urban India. Realising that education is the first step for emancipation, education for the entire family has been the constant demand of dalit women.

The potential contribution of dalit women writers to Dalit Literature is significant. From the outset, the writing of dalit women reflected self experience and burning indignation. Muktabai, an untouchable girl who read her essay on the problems and sufferings of the untouchable in the school established by the great reformer Jyothirao Phule, in 1852, was the first example of revolt. After a period of hundred years or more, dalit women have finally awakened and are again giving literary expression to their deep feelings. Kumud Bonsode, Sugandha Shende, Sarekhad Bhagat, Asha Thoral, Aruna Lokhande, Susheela Mool and Meena Gajbhija are such writers from Maharashtra. Among the works of dalit women writing in Hindi, the novels of Rajat Rani Meenu, Kaveri, Sushila Takbhore, Raj Bharati and Tara Parmar show significant literary promise. Caste based discrimination and all out deprivation was the main ammunition for the Marathi Dalit writers. A new crop of bold and experimental women writers have been bringing a quiet revolution lately. Meghna Pethe and Kavita Mahajan are some noteworthy names. ‘Little
Magazine’ tradition continues in Bengal. These little magazines cater to localized readerships and their writings carry culture specificity and a regional flavour of their own. Poetry is probably the most favoured genre of Bangla-Dalit literature. The Bangla Dalit novel offers fascinating insights into how dalit writers have brought autobiographical and historical elements into ‘fictions’, thereby blurring generic boundaries even further. The subjectivity of female-desiring and the politics of pleasure that have emerged as the resistant voice in women’s poetry seems to upset most of the canonical writers in Tamil. The sheer number of female poets in the 1990s was a phenomenon in Tamil. Salma, Kutti Revathi, and Sugirtha are the modern female dalit voices in poetry. Autobiography as a genre has come under major scrutiny and re-definition in Bama’s Karukku or Sangati or Azhagiya Nayaki Ammal’s Kavalai or Muthammal Palanisamy’s Naduvittu Nadu. The narrated story is personal but the lives portrayed are of the whole community’s. Naan Vidya (I am Vidya) is the first ever autobiography of a hijra written in Tamil. The self-excruciating narrative of unbearable weight found in these texts never falters towards the tone of successful overcoming of the same. At best they remain tales of survival.

Dalit Literature witnessed a rather late start in Tamil when compared to its counterparts in Marathi, Kannada or Hindi. Though Tamil dalit creative writings are at their embryonic stage, it is vibrant, multi-faceted, articulative and radically innovative. Dalit voice in literature could not find its distinct place in Tamil literary domain until late 1980s. The seventies and the eighties
witnessed a generation of writers whose writings were influenced by Marxist ideology and were marked by experimental narrative structures and positing of debates concerning ethical, social issues that influenced ‘Tamil Cultures’. The dalit identity was subsumed by these writers within a class identity. The dalit was represented as a worker and his oppression in an unequal social structure was defined within the paradigm of capitalist oppression of the working class. During this period, Tamil literature was increasingly invading the middle-class culture with its anxieties centered on honour, social prestige, women’s charity and erosion of moral fabric in the face of women entering the workplace. Discrimination of dalits and social injustice were not discussed with a radical force. Poomani’s early novels that were published between 1979 and 1982 were mild interventions that foregrounded dalit lifestyle in rural society polarized by caste and social hierarchy. Daniel, a Srilankan Tamil writer, whose novels in the 1980s brought up the issue of persecution and oppression of Tamil Dalits in Sri Lanka, left considerable impact on young writers in Tamil Nadu.

When dalits began to record their experiential reality in autobiographical or fictional mode, Dalit literature managed to carve out its own space in the Tamil literary space. The romanticized, sentimentalized dalits in the fiction of Poomani and Daniel find an authentic voice and affirmative presence in the writings of Sivakami, Edayavendan, UnjaiRajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaran, Imaiyam and others. Tamil dalit writers have employed various genres for self-articulation. In every genre that they choose to write, they also
make significant reformulation and render their choices as political, interventionist choices. Their choices have begun to leave a positive impact on mainstream literature. The short story has been used by dalit writers as a powerful tool to underscore oppression of dalits, their fight against their oppressors as well as to point out certain regressive anomalies within the dalit community. The interrogative and self-reflexive nature of Tamil dalit discourse renders it a significant pointer to contemporary social/political reality. Collections of short stories have been published throughout the Nineties and thereafter. In poetry, the predominant voices are those of dalit and female subjectivity. N.D Rajkumar’s poetry has enriched Tamil with a unique mysterious voice. There are the chauvinistic responses to female voices in poetry. Salma, Kutti Revathi, and Sugirtha Rani faced the indignation of stalwarts like Vikramadityan and others. Autobiography as a genre has come under major scrutiny now. In dalit autobiography, the self is constructed in the political domain of violence and resistance. It questions the upper caste hegemony without rancour or self-pity. Thus the discourse of dalit autobiographies traces the evolution of an autonomous individual self which is aware of and informs about the collective suffering of the community.

Dalit literature describes the world differently, from a dalit perspective. Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Tamil dalit literature. The first dalit novel in Tamil was written by a dalit woman writer Sivakami. Her novel has prepared the ground for a sustained critique of domestic violence and abuse of dalit women at home by dalit men - fathers, brothers, sons, fathers-in-
law, brothers-in-law, apart from sexual and occupational harassment faced by dalit women outside their homes at the hands of upper caste men and the police. Dual oppression of dalit women on grounds of caste and gender forms an important issue of concern in Dalit Literature. Abimani’s short stories bring out the gender pressures over dalit women and caste hegemony over women at large.

Another issue focused by dalit writers is dalit identity. The dalit protagonist is established as the representative of dalit community and dalit identity. The profound interconnectedness between the caste identity and the self of the speaking subject arises largely because of the oppressed position of the subject. Bama’s Sangati is about a community’s identity and not about a single self only. All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing, as a strategy of resistance to social oppression. Bama’s writings as that of Sivakami is an activist intervention. Bama through her writing hopes to influence dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Writers employ a wide variety of literary forms, devices and styles as weapons of resistance. The language of resistance is a powerful weapon of the oppressed, and writers like Bama have handled this weapon very skillfully to resist the oppression meted out to her own community. Dalit women’s sexuality is an important domain of creative or critical concern in Tamil Dalit literature. Dalit writers discuss the containment of dalit women’s sexuality from pre-puberty stage to menopause by family and caste bound society. Imaiyam depicts how dalit women are forced to commodify themselves in order to stave off poverty and help themselves and
their dependents survive. Sexual assaults at home and rape at workplaces or custodial rape are the most encountered experience of dalit women. Dalit writers foreground such a sexually repressive and oppressive social structure that invades the domestic as well as the social space. Their writings call attention to collusion of caste hegemony and patriarchal structure which seek to control a dalit woman’s sexual life and conduct. In Dalit Literature, there is a strong plea for reclamation of dalit art forms. Against the stories of hardships, they also render their folksongs and folklore. The dalit art forms are centered on local Gods and heroes. They are often closely linked to the performer’s mode of employment and production of goods. They have particular dalit features of spectacle, mark, gesture and language. This concept of dalit culture sets up an alternate classicism for dalit writers, and forms a different poetics based on oral traditions. Themes of empowerment are prevalent in the later workers of dalit writers. Their livid experiences prove that they cannot be segregated as oppressive writers; they are powerful creators who could organize themselves to empower through community-bonding and take recourse to armed resistance to counter orthodox biases and traditional forms of discrimination heaped upon them continually over the years.

When new creative writing by self-styled dalit writers began to appear, critical writings and comments also had gone along with it. Unjairajan, editor of ‘Manusanga’, claims that it was in his journal in 1990 that certain works were given prominence under the category of ‘Dalit Literature’. The other famous critics are Raj Gauthaman, A Marx, and Ravikumar who had published
articles on dalit writings. Raj Gauthaman sees dalit writings as essentially subversive in character, bringing both content and forms which challenged received literary norms: “Dalit literature describes the world differently from a dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature” (Gauthaman, Dalit 98). To the question who dalit writers are, Gauthaman answers:

Who has the right to write about Dalits? Of course, one who is born a dalit has that birthright. But it is also possible for dalits to become so attuned to upper-class attitudes that they have lost their sense of themselves and may even write as enemies of dalits. By the same token, it is possible for those who were not born as dalits to write about Dalits if they truly perceive themselves as Dalits (Gauthaman, Haloes 96).

This significant critic has brought out a collection of critical essays on cultural, social and political concerns of dalit community, re-readings of literary classics and critical evaluation of contemporary dalit writing. Tamil playwright and critic Gunasekaran writes about dalit art forms which reflects dalit culture. He distinguishes between ‘Sevviyal’ (classical arts) and ‘naattupuraiyal’ (folklore). He claims that ‘naattupuraiyal’ ought properly to be divided into dalit and non-dalit art forms. Dalit art forms, he believes, do not depend on mainstream Hinduism or on the Sanskritic Gods, the puranic
stories, nor the Sanskrit epics. They depend on local Gods and heroes. Gunasekaran’s famous play *Bali Aadugal* (1999) takes up the question of interlocking of gender and caste concerns most forcefully. The playwright cum critic points out that dalit women are not allowed an independent individual identity and that dalit patriarchy allows dalit women’s subjugation and perpetuates hierarchical relations within dalit community. Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan points to the instability of the notion of women’s identity and to the power imbalances which exist between different groups of women under the blanket notion of gender. Taking this further, the Dalit feminist critic, Sharmila Rege writes:

> The Dalit Feminist standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities, or at other times differences ignored for ‘the feminist cause’ (7).

Caste and gender have become important subversive literary and critical leitmotifs in nearly all Indian languages. Rise and growth of dalit and women’s literature occupies a special position. Many women writers feel uncomfortable being described and discussed as an exclusive group and assert that by assigning ‘women’s writing’ under a separate category, the marginal position of women is only reinforced. Dalit literature on the other hand is quite vociferous regarding its separate identity from the mainstream writing. The
discomfort of woman writers to be so called and classified also brings into question the subversive character of their writing. Ambai, a feminist critic, makes incisive critiques on the construction of the Tamil feminine subjectivity through literature and points to the conformist attitude even in reformist/revolutionary writers such as nationalist poet Subrahmanya Bharati and the ‘radical’ writer Jayakantan. Therefore despite avowals to the contrary, there is definite need to understand the ways in which a woman’s literary tradition has emerged and has nurtured subversive techniques and themes. To this effect, it is necessary to juxtapose this tradition against the mainstream without necessarily considering the mainstream as superior. Ambai in The Face Behind the Mask asks: “Why a woman writing about women’s experiences and issues is immediately seen as ‘woman writer’ while the same does not hold true for a man”. (Lakshmi 61) It is necessary to realize that such an act of categorization is not the sole prerogative of criticism. Publishing houses themselves evolve many such categories. Novels like Karukku were published by Macmillan India under two heads: ‘The Macmillan Modern Novels in Translation Series’ and ‘Dalit Writing in Translation’ thereby already evolving two critical categories: Dalit writing and translation. In such a scene, language is but one of the many parameters. Karukku belongs to the tradition of Tamil novel. Tamil Dalit novel or Tamil dalit women’s novel as translation has become Tamil Dalit Literature in translation. Tamil dalit literature has gained a positive impetus through Dalit Publishing houses and more significantly through translations. Dalit publishing houses like Vitiyal Pathippagam in Coimbatore undertake not only publication
of Dalit writings but also publishes translations of Dalit works from other Indian languages into Tamil. This traffic between Tamil and non-Tamil dalit works through the exercise of translation is a healthy, positive intervention or trend in Dalit studies. But it should be noted that Tamil dalit works are translated less into other Indian languages. Tamil Dalit writers have a better access to non-Tamil dalit texts through translation though their works have not received significant visibility in other Indian languages. Sivakami has translated her first novel *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* into English as *The Grip of Change* (2006); Bama’s *Karukku* (1992) *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) are available in English translations and *Sangati* in French too. Imaiyam’s novels *Koveru Kazhudaigal* (1994) and *Arunugam* (1999) were also translated.

The influence of Ambedkarite thought is substantial and significant in Tamil Dalit discourse. Writers posit Dr. Ambedkar’s call to Dalits to ‘educate, unite and organize’ as the central statement in their works. The story of Babasahib’s life, his work, ideas and message awakened the Dalit society, the Dalit movement and Dalit writers. Ambedkarite ideology is the true inspiration for Dalit literature. Ambedkar said that Dalit must gain strength to take the reins of power and enact laws. These are new and revolutionary ideas for dalits, who have been living a life marked by helplessness and lack of options, subject to slavery that was imposed on them. A literature that supports inequality is not only unacceptable to him; in his view, there must be mass movement against such literature. Ambedkar did not stop with saying that ‘Manusmriti’ was unacceptable to him, he launched a Satyagraha in Mahad (Maharashtra) on
December 25\textsuperscript{th} 1927 against ‘Manusmriti’ and burned the text terming it a document that endorsed inequality. Every text must be accountable to society and to humanity. He took the position that literature must enhance equality and destroy inequality. He asserted that writers should take inspiration from the greatness of common people:

Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there (Ambedkar 8).

Ambedkar accorded the highest place to humanism. Inspired by him, Dalit literature is a declaration of human freedom, which encourages human liberation and firmly opposes notions of race, religion and caste. It rebels against any culture, society or literature that degrades human beings and so it will have to be analyzed in the context of the Ambedkarite thought system, of which rebellion is an invisible part.

The other important aspect of Ambedkar’s influence is his use of legal system and the constitution as spaces from where the caste battle can be fought. He is venerated as the one person who made legal and constitution rights possible for Dalits who were denied even basic human dignity, thereby
providing them with a suitable platform to fight from. Yet, Ambedkar has also
been much criticized, especially for his reproach of Gandhi and of the Congress
ideology. Padma in her book titled *Fiction as Window* comments, “Although
Gandhi saw himself as a Dalit right activist, his activism was largely what is
today turned ‘integrationist’ in nature; he sought to change Hinduism from
within, while Ambedkar sought to change Hinduism altogether” (175). Bama,
in a personal interview, commented:

> We suffer a lot because of Gandhi. He named us ‘Harijans’ which
we don’t like. He interprets it as ‘sons or children of God’ which
means ‘devadasis’, the temple prostitutes – They are known as
children of God. He spoke about untouchability but as far as I know
he never fought to abolish untouchability as much as he fought for
any other cause. He spoke about abolition of untouchability but did
not work vigourously. Because of him we didn’t get the double
electoral system which Ambedkar formulated. So even to this day
we are not able to get minimum power in politics. Not even in the
Panchayat election (see Appendix 1).

In yet another interview with Manoj Nair, she said, “I truly wish that
Ambedkar’s double voting pattern was implemented. If I am right it was the
Poona fact that did away with it. That would have given us more powers”
(*Bama Interview*). However, nothing could be as dramatic an expression of the
Dalit struggle for self-emancipation as their political self-organization, which
culminated in an unambiguous, emphatic victory for a Dalit dominated party in the legislature of Uttar Pradesh.

Education is and has been an important mode of social uplift. It was denied to many sections of society either due to gender discrimination or poverty. With the introduction of British education and setting up of missionary schools across India, a small but politically valuable number of dalits gained access to formal education. The role of education can never be overemphasized; it gives the subject a certain amount of self-confidence and courage to question established notions of class and caste superiority. The social upliftment made possible by education is precisely the kind of benefit that caste Hindus and the collaborating Christians do not want the Dalits to avail of. It is made evident in Karukku of Bama where much of the narrative space is taken up in dealing with the fruits of education. This importance given to education can also be related to the life and influence of Dr. Ambedkar who had himself owed part of his revolutionary status to the education he got in the army cantonment, the scholarship given by the Gaekwad of Baroda and his education in New York and London. Therefore, although Karukku does not make any overt statements regarding Dr. Ambedkar or his influence, the undercurrent of viewing education almost as a panacea can be traced to the life of Ambedkar that has became quite well known among dalits.
3.3.2 Future of Dalit Literature

Dalit literature is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature. It has contributed fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. But unfortunately it has been charged as propagandist literature. It has been criticized that this literature lacks artistic finesse. Due to the commonalities in Dalit writer’s thoughts, experiences and emotions, Dalit literature appears to be univocal as the language they use is dialectical and hence considered to be vulgar and obscene.

Dalit writing is essentially subversive in character bringing both content and forms that challenge received literary norms. The emergence of such writings may not be purely ‘literary’ but there is a pressing need felt by dalits and others to bring dalit experiences into the field of literature, as part of the growing awareness that the oppression and suppression of dalits is something that needs to be denounced and corrected. The experience described is social; hence it is articulated as collective and not individual. The awareness in Dalits and their potential economic as well as aesthetics for writing has been made possible because of the phenomenal increase in literacy level among the Dalits. Dalit literature has begun to bring about changes; to enable non-dalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset which made them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves and instead to see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims. It has put forward new and subversive ethics which not only awaken the
conscience of non-dalits but also fill Dalits with confidence and pride. Thus it shares its aims with those of other marginalized and subaltern groups worldwide. Raj Gauthaman critiques: “It is a Tamil and Indian reflection of the global literature of the oppressed whose politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice and equality” (98). Dalit writers have frequently compared their work to African-American literature and Dr. Ambedkar to Martin Luther King Jr. - as the two leaders compared influenced their people to realize their ‘selves’ and create an identity beyond the narrow confines of race and caste.

In the post-colonial context, translation helps the expansion of local literatures and facilitates democratization. It renders ‘Third World’ texts into subjects for ‘First World’ consumption. Translations into English remain unfortunately the primary means of acquiring visibility for regional writers. Thus the translations of tribal, dalit and local texts into English become authentic representations of that culture for consumption by ‘First World’ readers and academics with a post colonial bent. Translation helps in exposing the continuation of untouchability and dalit readers could see their own pain in the texts. It has meant to both shock and shame the non-dalit readers in order to inspire change and to invoke a sense of constitutional justice and social responsibility. The pain of caste discrimination, humiliation and physical violence which is otherwise ignored in public discourse is re-presented within the target text and thus gains a global representation.
Translation theory and practice participates in the construction of cultural identity by reforming the boundaries of the sayable and altering the term of affiliation. Sherry Simon affirms that “cultural identity as a process of negotiation is constantly in process” (38). She is against a tradition which views translation as violation and culture as homogenous enclave to be recovered and preserved. Derrida would argue that the ‘origin’ is itself dispersed, its identity undecidable because translation does not restore or reproduce an original as the original transforms itself. In spite of various parameters used to evaluate translation policy and activity, it can be conceptualized as a mode of cross-cultural knowledge producing activity. Original text written in regional vernacular is virtually inaccessible in our society. To gain cultural control over colonized text, the subaltern must learn to articulate the necessity of being heard. Translation offers a place or a site where the long-silenced subaltern can speak and give testimony. The translated texts not only attain a powerful force in cultural renewal but also valorize individuals and their texts.

Lakshmi Holmstrom, the translator of Bama’s novels Karukku and Sangati, faced certain problematic situations while translating the novels from Tamil to English. Bama’s rustic language took Holmstrom to task. In the Introduction to The Inner Courtyard she points out that the readers have to constantly make an effort ‘to respond sensitively’ (XVIII) to the details in the translated stories which express nuances of everyday life in a particular part of India. Also, there are many markers that are impossible to be conveyed in
English. Such difficulties notwithstanding, the works of Dalits and other subaltern writing would not have gained recognition without the intellectual activity of translation. Thus translation traverses the territories of nation, person and culture and acquires a global cultural perspective. The works of the marginalized are exposed to other realms of understanding even though there are some underlying problems.

Women’s life-writing from post-colonial nations often attains strategic importance for feminist theorists: Memoirs and diaries – personal accounts that capture the women’s experience in her own voice – have a sense of immediacy and authenticity. In the hierarchy of structural oppression, there are women placed further down the scale like tribal, lower caste women, lesbians etc. and writings by such women often present a challenge because they resist homogenizing into the larger category of ‘Third World Women’. In many cases, writings by these post-colonial women including lesbians are available only in translations. In India, dalit writing by women function like ‘testimonials’ because they are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. Julia Swindells has provided an optimistic account of the new radical uses of autobiography:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, and working class people – have more than
begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via
the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself (7).

The idea that autobiography or life-writing can become the text of the
oppressed, articulating through one’s personal experience or experiences which
may be representative of a particular marginalized group is an important one.
It could testify the oppression and empower the subject through their cultural
inscription and recognition. The writings of Dalit women novelist Sivakami
and those of Bama document the sufferings and atrocities committed upon
them. Every text in the genre functions as a collective document, as the
narrative moves from individual to community through a retelling of trauma.

‘Testimonial’ is a genre commonly associated with Latin American
atrocity narratives. John Beverley defines it thus, “A novel or novella-length
narrative in book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is
also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of
narration is usually a ‘life’ or significant life experience” (102). It is a
narrative that exists at the margins of literature, representing those subjects
excluded from authorized representation. In most cases, testimonial narratives
are documents of atrocities and suffering, bringing one into contact with the
victimized. The testimonial is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of
another who remains voiceless. Thus the speaking subaltern subject of the
narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are
victims of social and linguistic literary marginalization. Karukku as testimonial
life-writing enables Bama to share her tale of pain, so that personal testimony becomes accurate historical witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression. Testimonial acts as a narrative of witnessing. The narrator becomes the witness recounting the trauma. Dalits who have been outside the law, outside expression, outside genre, outside everything, produce autobiographical statements about their lives as part of a larger social text. The genre thus acquires the power of resistance through two means in Dalit autobiography. One is through the author’s own testimonial to suffering, linked with the suffering of the entire community. The second is an injunction upon the reader to bear witness to whatever is recorded. There are two levels of witnessing at work in dalit testimonial, the primary witnessing by the victim-author and the secondary witnessing by the reader. The move between these two forms of witnessing occurs through narrativization and advocacy. Thus the testimonial makes a move from ‘seeing’ to ‘voicing’. The witness through the narrator’s speech/textualization attains narrative clarity and coherence over the experience. The narrator moves, in the course of narration, from individual to collective, experiential testimony to polemics. Then the narrator engages in an act of advocacy, or proposing a programme of action of the entire community. The narrator then moves into the role of advocate within the role or witness. The testimonial calls for certain responsibilities to respond to the suffering and trauma of the other. In the next stage, the reader has to witness the atrocities that India has inflicted upon an entire population. Readers of dalit writing can be only “… secondary witnesses, so it becomes impossible for the reader to
stand in for the victim. The only solution is to reactivate and transmit not the trauma but an unsettlement that manifests empathy with the victim” (722), suggests La Capra. Testimonial bridges the gap between the suffering individual and the communities of listeners who provide empathetic responses. Dalit narratives become ‘out law’ genre, to borrow the term of Caren Kaplan, which disrupts literary conventions and constitutes resistance literature in post colonial societies.

The realities in Dalit life and those in the life of the Blacks in America show commonalities - the poverty, ignorance, oppression and the ultimate alienation are the common markers of such literatures. Like India, the United States is also a plural society where several cross-currents operate within the nation. It is interesting to note the solidarity being built between two oppressed peoples – the Blacks and the Dalits. This solidarity is a good example of cosmopolitan post-colonialism and reflects a new ethics across identities and borders. Comparisons between oppressed groups are not only natural but also sometimes necessary. Natural, because their struggle to reclaim the human space denied to them for centuries is almost similar: necessary, because the group that has taken a lead in reclaiming the space influences the other group in devising their strategies far removed from the area of their operation.

3.4 **Similarity in Dissimilarity**

Comparative Literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across
genres, across boundaries, between literatures and other arts across disciplines. It can be broadly defined as the study of literature without borders. Scholarship in comparative literature includes studying literacy and social states in American and other countries, studying the like of literature of folklore and mythology, studying colonial and post-colonial writings in different parts of the world. Lately, ethnic and indigenous writers from different continents, whose works remained unread, begin to challenge literary canonical concepts, coming to the forefront to be compared with other marginal writings of the world. Thus the Indian Dalit literature offers itself to be compared with the African-American or Black literature of United States. In comparing the dalit and black literatures, the East and West are merged and unify the world into a single whole. The scholars in comparative literature desire to study literature beyond national boundaries to find out the implications, and the underlying identities of both similarities and differences. They could also integrate experience with other cultural phenomena such as historical changes, philosophical concepts, social movements, religious beliefs etc. With the advancement of period and development of literature, comparative studies crumble the literal and metaphorical walls and soften the borders.

Works considered foundational to the discipline of comparative literature include Transylvanian Hungarian Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz’s scholarship and New Zealand scholar H.M Posnett’s work in the Eighteenth Century. However, antecedents can be found in the ideas of Johann Wolfgang Van Goethe in his vision of ‘World Literature’ and Russian Formalist
Alexander Veselousky laying the ground works for the discipline. During the Nineteenth Century, comparatists such as Fyodor Buslaeu were chiefly concerned with deducing the spirit of the times. Though they were judged chauvinistic, Eurocentric or even racist, their intention was to increase the understanding of other cultures and not to assert superiority over them. After the advent of the American school of comparative literature, cultural studies like Chinese literature, Arabic literature, and other literatures of the world languages including Indian, English and Continental European literatures became familiar. Prior to this, the scope of comparative literature in the West was typically limited to the literature of Western Europe and Anglo-America, predominantly literature in English, German, French and occasionally Italian and Spanish. The comparatists in the United States and other nations re-focus the discipline away from the nation-based approach with which it has previously been associated towards a cross-cultural approach that pays no heed to national boarders. It has already developed representing wider studies of globalization and interculturalism. The current trends reflect the growing importance of cultural studies in the field of literature. Hence, the writings of the ‘Third World’ get their momentum in the world literature and also offer space for marginal literature, as well. Historically, comparative literature demonstrated a focus on European Literature and American Literature but the discipline paid more attention to ‘other’ literature recently. It has intrinsical content and form which facilitates the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it is fragmented and pluralistic due to the borrowing of
methods from other disciplines. This creates the background for the comparison of the black literature of the United States and the Dalit literature of India. In doing so the national boundaries between different literatures are obliterated so that a distinctive contribution made by every nation to world art and culture is blended into a ‘global literature’.

3.4.1. Blacks and Dalits

The African-American writers were a source of inspiration to the Dalit writers, particularly the treatment of suffering and identity in their works. Like in America, autobiographies of Dalits have become a powerful instrument in analyzing their situation and in explaining their experiences. The printed material on the Negro problem in America proves its importance. Compared to America, the amount of literature that exists on the untouchables in India is negligible. Dr. Ambedkar reasons that unlike Americans, Indians in general lack social consciousness. The Black race was pointed to as inherently inferior and pseudo-scientific myths were invented to show the superiority of the White race. In India, the untouchables were perceived as inferior on the basis of their birth in an ‘avarna’ caste – an intricate web of Karmic laws was created to permanently condemn them to a lowly position in society. ‘Negro’ was a ridiculous term for the African-Americans; hence, they called themselves ‘Blacks’. Similarly, Dalits have ridiculed the term ‘Harijan’ and named themselves ‘Dalits’. They abandoned the inauspicious and uncivilitized names thrust upon them, just as the blacks who changed their names only to abandon
the names received from their masters, as they symbolized slavery. Both underwent a religious conversion, one to end slavery and other due to their exasperation with untouchability.

Both the blacks and the dalits were slaves. Blacks were enslaved since 1619 when the first ship brought the Africans to America. Dalits experienced slavery since ancient times, within their own motherland by Savarna society. Blacks were total slaves as they were bought and sold like animals but some slaves paid slave money to buy themselves freedom from their masters. But in the Indian society, freedom from untouchability could not be bought, as it was imposed from birth, which made them much more miserable than the blacks. Black slaves could live in the households of their masters and the white children could be suckled of a black woman’s breast. But even the touch and shadow of the dalit were considered untouchable by the touchables; however the dalit women were sexually exploited by the Savarna masters. Both lived in communities, usually outside the city or in the outskirts of the countryside. They were inhumanly treated, insulted and humiliated in the name of race or caste to which they belonged. James Baldwin says that the American Negro is a unique creation and he has no counterpart anywhere and no predecessors. Dr. Ambedkar also expresses a similar opinion while writing about the experiences of the dalits as unique because there existed permanent segregation camps in India where hereditary slaves lived their wretched lives. Untouchability, he believed, is a unique phenomenon unknown to humanity except the Hindus. The Dalits had been demoralised to such an extent that they
took a long time to develop resistance to manipulation. Their motivation to reach the level of consciousness was a manipulative strategy employed by the superior castes which was backed by religion. The resistance to their situation was weak that they never turned violent. The African-American’s desire for freedom could not be subsumed as they revolted in the ship when they were taken to America, they revolted when they landed and continued their revolt throughout their enslavement. A slave should be conscious of his enslavement and to be conscious of this condition will be the initial step for the battle for freedom. An untouchable is deprived of his liberty indirectly and hence unconscious of his enslavement: “It is slavery through untouchability. It is real though it is indirect. It is enduring because it is unconscious. Of the two orders, untouchability is beyond doubt the worse,” commented Dr. Ambedkar (Kapoor 6).

3.4.2 Resistance of Blacks and Dalits

The resistance to and revolt against the manipulation of the lives of Blacks and Dalits differs because of variation in historical and economical conditions of their existence. The manipulation caused a split in the psyche of these people that they were made to accept the world views of their masters, although reluctantly. The process of liberation of both the groups began with the struggle over the nature of reality. It involved the questioning of reality imposed on them and then redefining it themselves so that they could shift from the terrain fixed to them and acquire new frames of reference. It was during Harlem
Renaissance that Black writers began to evolve into an entity with a black identity. For the first time the black writers emphasized that the blacks are a historical entity as well as human beings. When the blacks questioned and refused to accept the white world’s definitions, the power of the whites was threatened. Likewise, in India, the Savarnas prescribed the limits of avarna existence, the mode of their living, the level of communication with them and the impossibility of change. Although dissenting voices were raised by Hindu saints who were religious and social reformers, the untouchables remained the same for centuries accepting the image of them. It was with the advent of the British and the consequent resistance against the imperial rule that attempts were made to redefine their existence in social terms. Slowly, social movements sprang up posing a challenge to the hegemony of the upper caste. The societies and literatures of African-Americans and Dalits bear considerable resemblance because the emotional worlds they inhabit – constituting their pain, rebellion, hopes and desires – are similar. African-Americans have expressed this sorrow and pain through Blues, ballads, stories, novels, dances and songs, and of course through autobiographies or self-writings. Dalit writers too have articulated their miserable plight through their poetry, fiction and autobiographies. The white writers failed to establish any meaningful relationship between the white and the overwhelming presence of Black ethnic group. Tony Morrison argues that any understanding of American Literature must include the presence of Blacks in it, as it is not the exclusive preserve of the Whites. For the whites, blacks were non-existent or invisible and they were
only part of the landscape. In India, the Savarnas failed to establish any meaningful relationship between the dominant castes and the avarna. The savarna imagination seems to be unshaped by the overwhelming presence of untouchables who were then labeled as Harijans and lately identified as Dalits in canonical Indian Literature. If present, they had only marginal existence and were never credited with full human qualities. No Indian history or Indian literature would be complete without the presence of Dalits in it. Though Blacks have entered White literature, the representations are selective and arbitrary and to a large extent ideologically determined. Similarly, non-dalits have stereotyped the characters of Dalits in their literature. So when the blacks and Dalits found their voice and could represent their experiences they were forceful, raw and unembellished. But it cannot be denied that the ground for such a discourse is made possible by non-blacks and non-dalit writers.

When the, black and dalit cultures are compared through their literature, it could be viewed as a literature of revolt. They have embraced revolt in order to reclaim their history and identity from what must be called cultural terrorism. Gayle comments, “revolt is the first necessity of a free people, and the first right that any oppressor must suspend” (38). These literatures are discussed as vehicles of revolution, change, consciousness – raising, struggle and social commitment. The struggle is against the injustice done to them and humanism becomes the centre point in both these literatures. The inferior status accorded to dalits and blacks in the established order and the questions raised from living this inferiority cannot be ignored when assessing these literatures.
It is essential to use a sociological perspective in analyzing it because the birth of such literature is social in nature. Feminism has emerged as a new and strong weapon in both black and dalit literatures. It describes the multiple marginal positions of women. In America, it challenges the ethno-centrism of western feminism and the sexism of male-dominated black culture. The potential contribution of dalit feminist writers is very significant. It reflects self-experience and a burning indignation that a dalit woman is a dalit amongst dalits. It is due to casteism that dalit women are dishonoured and molested. Protesting against the patriarchy is the strongest term possible in the agenda of feminism. Dalit men are not sympathetic to the dalit women, which makes them triply oppressed. Along with Bama, another Dalit Feminist scholar and activist, Swathy Margaret, agrees to the dalit male’s general attitude towards dalit women. Dalit women writers also encourage empowerment of women. Dalit women, being hard workers, enable them to be independent in a way. They are able to dismantle the conventional notions of religious hierarchy too. Contemporary Black-American female writers present an alternative social construct for the present and future based on women’s lived experiences. There is a commitment to fight against race and gender inequality across differences of class, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Like the dalits, the black women needed recognition of their struggle, and promotion of empowerment through forceful articulation, visibility and self-definition. Regaining their culture and establishing their identity is often evident in their writings. The dalit women and black women have become cognizant of the
multiple systemic forces of oppression and they pursue with collective actions
for social change, transforming society and themselves through their own
optimism and self-determination. The representative writers Maya Angelou and
Bama manifest these themes in their writings.

Levi-Strauss’s contention is that women are a person and a sign, a
human being and a depersonalized, subjectless structure (496). Woman’s
relationship to language of women and language will take different paths
according to whether woman is understood as being a person or a sign. As a
person, woman is a transcendental being, a consciousness and a voice where
she is endowed with individual characteristics which determine her value as a
member of society. Her experience of life is contingent upon her psychological
make-up, her individual circumstances, her social history and limitations linked
to age, sex, and creed and so on. A person’s perception of events is necessarily
inflected by somatic and psychological characteristics, as each person’s
experience of life is unique. For Gilbert and Gubar, women authors are
individuals who react in a collective, sisterly manner to a common social
reality (xii). This explains the recurrence of topics, themes, images and
metaphors in the literary works of women.

Comparative studies on women’s writings have proceeded to validate
women’s perceptions of life by restoring their writings to public view. In the
wake of structuralism, new attention has been directed to the politics of
representation and particularly to the relationship between language and
representation. There is interdependence between life and language of the writer, especially a woman writer, where the perception and usage of language differ from that of men. Linguistic behaviour could best be delineated and interpreted in its appropriate socio-cultural contexts. Language then is a part, product and vehicle of culture. It is essential to consider the relevant socio-cultural contexts of their communications: “Recognition for the language of my people is the biggest award I can win,” says Bama (Bama Recognition). Since language is an important part of the culture of a particular group - may it be blacks, aborigines, or dalits – and its pattern, linguistic changes must take place, at least partly, in response to cultural changes in general. However, one basic strategy has been to establish identifiable and separate discursive traditions in order to give voice to the particular experience of black and dalit women. For women who have been hidden from history simply pulling on the record and valuing such experience is a major political initiative.

3.5 Conclusion: Resentment and Resistance

Black and dalit writings attempt to reconstruct ‘histories from below’ or recover the experiences of those who have been hitherto hidden from history. In the words of Julia Kristeva, the feminist psychoanalysts, ‘abjection’\(^3\) marks out a landscape of feeling by and about women that places them below and beyond culture - almost outside what can be represented within it. Woman has always been man’s dependent if not his slave. Though the situation is beginning to change, women’s legal status is nowhere the same as that of men.
and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. However, the writings of women from the East and the West, and, especially the subversive writings, initiate a comparison, which is relevant to the immediate social needs of the people to be aware of the power and value of literatures of other cultures. The possibility of creating and comparing the subversive literatures creates a sense of cultural superiority. No national literature and no single literature, however rich, is rich enough to present the highest literary achievements of man. The study of literature has to be directed towards or include the writings of subversive literature as well to achieve totality.

In the context of wider discourse of oppression, comparison between the dalit and black women writers is both valid and important in showing how marginalized groups are given access to the larger literary sphere and attain a certain narrative authority by writing their life-experiences. Their life experiences may act as a powerful social critique and an act of political resistance for marginalized communities in their own right. The descriptive understanding of the dalit texts including aesthetics, narrative strategies etc. become unique expressions of a particular kind of social oppression, specifically located in the Indian caste system. The oppression suffered by the blacks, especially the black women, is also rare and painful, but the experiences differ with the location of oppression. Hence, the African-Americans and Dalits vastly differ in their description of the experiences of oppression. Themes of physical violence including the black experience of ‘lynching’, the female experience of sexual exploitation, and the dalits’
experience of being beaten by the upper castes or the physical exploitation of women in spite of being ‘untouchable’ must be treated differently. There is a common assumption that members of the marginalized group will both ‘want’ and ‘need’ to write autobiographical literature in order to express their experiences of oppression. The mainstream literary field considers that life-writing is the one and the only door open to subversive writers to participate in the literary field and consider it to be an oppressive genre as it allows the dalits and the blacks to share these experiences and expressions. Critics and readers often condemn these literatures as literature of lament but they had created a central space in the creative core. It is characterized by the call for self-identity and assertion through oppression. Both Black and Dalit writers have reached a stage where they are obviously moving beyond ‘anger’ and are not just confined to castigating the ‘other’ but exploring and emboldening to attain empowerment.

Notes

1Slave code: They were laws enacted in the United States which defined the status and the rights of masters. Those codes gave slave owners absolute power over their human property.

2Dhamma: ‘The Buddha and his Dhamma’ is Ambedkar’s monumental work. It provides the interpretation Ambedkar had put on Buddhism. It is a fusion of the personality of Ambedkar and the philosophy of Buddha. Buddha’s Dhamma was based on doctrines which are rationally possible. Dhamma is a path of practice that leads to wisdom and liberation from suffering.
Abjection: Its ordinary meaning denotes being thought of as inferior, either by oneself or by others or less than human, something to be cast out. For Julia Kristeva, abjection marks out a landscape of feeling by and about women that places them before, below and beyond culture - almost outside what can be represented within it.
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