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Introduction

In the twenty first century, India is emerging as a fast developing nation. But still one section of her society remains oppressed and still it is living in the worst and unhygienic conditions, they are Dalits. Government and Non Government Organizations’ plans are introduced time and again to empower Dalits. However, still a large section of Dalit yet to empower. So, time and again, Dalit and non-Dalit activists have started Dalit movements. The movements’ aim is to empower oppressed and depressed classes of India. Dalit movement in its nature is political, social, cultural and literary.

As a matter of fact, close studies of Indian history presents how downtrodden and oppressed were marginalized by social discrimination. In ancient time, Buddha and Mahavira had challenged irrational and inhuman social system of their time to lift up the social status of downtrodden and oppressed. It shows that there was a social discrimination against fellow human beings. Thus, discrimination based on caste was practiced freely since ancient time.

Later, in the mediaeval ages, throughout in India, inhuman and irrational practices against downtrodden were going on. During that period, Dalit and non-Dalit saint-poets like Kabir, Raidas, Namdeo, Chokhamela, Kanaka, Sant Gyaneswar, Sawata Mali, Purander Das, Ram Das, Surdas, Tulsi Das, Chaitanya, Tukaram, Ramanuja, Basava, Nanak and many other had highlighted the worst conditions of the Dalits in their spiritual poems. But the saint-poets’ movement was a failure as it had focused only on moral and ethical social responsibility of the orthodox Hindus. The saint-poet had not asked for political or economical empowerment of Dalits but their human acceptance.
During the British Rule in India, the Dalit movements started at many fronts – political, social, economical, and literary. The missions of Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar were to empower Dalits. As a result, Dalits started learning. Mahatma Phule set example of educational empowerment whereas Dr. Ambedkar had set model of educational and political empowerment. Inspired by Mahatma Phule, Dr. Ambedkar and Black’s Human Right movement, the Dalits have been actively participating in the Dalit movement to retrieve human identity, equality and dignity. Dalit’s human identity is gradually accepted but not in every field. After Dr. Ambedkar, in present time Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh has set example of political empowerment for Dalits.

As a matter of fact, during the first half of the twentieth century, the first generation of Dalits got educated. The educated Dalits started writing. Their writings were thoroughly moving around Dr. Ambedkar, Ambedkarite ideology and inhuman social conditions of Dalits. It was the first and concrete attempt of the Dalit writers to establish their identity.

Marxist writings and the rise of Black literature have added novelty to the world literature. These writings have focused on marginalized human beings. The Black literature is the protest against race-based discrimination. Marxist writings are the protest against class-based discrimination. These writings have not only raised their voice against discrimination but also have struggled to obtain equal human status. Dalit literature is also influenced by both the writings.

From the second half of twentieth century to present time, Dalit writers have presented first hand experiences of identity crisis. The Dalit literature presents protest against
caste-based discrimination simultaneously it presents the identity of unique Dalit culture, Dalit sensibility and Dalit identity.

Black literature and Marxist literature are different and have important place in world literature. Similarly, Dalit literature is unique and different from the mainstream Indian writings. It is a voice of oppressed Indians. Thus Dalit literature has the global significance.

Dalit critics have given different definitions of Dalit literature and Dalit aesthetics. Dalit literature is based on socio-cultural realities of India and in this condition Dalit’s identity crisis. And Dalit aesthetics is purely based on reality.

Dalit are mainly writing in their regional languages. Considering the values of their writings, leading selected works are translated in English. In this thesis, these translated writings are considered as primary sources. Dalit’s human identity is also highlighted by the non-Dalit writers like Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan. For the objective study of the research problem, mainstream writers’ Dalit centered works are also considered as the primary sources. The work which is written in regional languages, I tried to translate them in English. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, seventh edition is used for the research work.

Dalit literature of the twenty first century, the novel writings, deals with Dalits’ identity. Earlier their identity was not accepted. The aim of this thesis is to study Dalits’ identity and identity quest in their writings, in most of all literary forms.
Reviews of Relevant Research Literature:

For my research work following works are reviewed.

1. **Bharathiraja, S.**

   - *A Study of Social Realism in the Select Indian Dalit Autobiographies*
   - Submitted to Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, 2012.

   This thesis primarily deals with the autobiographies written by Dalit writers. It presents that even after many decades of independence of India the conditions of thousands of Dalits are worst and they are denied equality and identity. Further, socio-economic and socio-political exploitations as well as developments of Dalits are presented through the autobiographies of Omprakash Valmiki, Vasant Moon, Baby Kamble, Siddalingaiah, Bama and K. A. Gunasekaran.

2. **Patel, Neerav Hirabahi**

   - *Gujarati Dalit Poetry (1978-2003)-A Study*

   This thesis focuses on Dalit poetry in Gujarati Language from 1978 to 2003 as a unique type of literature to explore liberty, equality and fraternity for Dalits. It presents that this new literature has become the voice of Dalit liberation movement.

3. **Dalton, Fiona Margaret Page**

   - *Transforming Dalit Identity: Ancient Drum Beat, New Song*
   - Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 2008.
This thesis deals with socio-cultural side of Dalits. It also presents how Dalits use folk music to represent oppression faced by them in the name of caste and religion. It presents Parattai, a radical Dalit Christian pastor in South India whose folk music has created proud Dalit identity. Parattai’s music has transformed Dalits from the inside out and thus worked towards the equality of all Dalits.

4. Ram, Mantri Venkat Raghu

- *Reading, Writing and Rewriting: Dalit Literature and Discursive Practices*

- North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 2002.

   This thesis presents that nowadays the voices of Dalits are too strong enough to be avoided. Dalits’ writings are not limited only to the region or nation but they reach to the international level. It also presents that the Dalits have socio-political awareness which now leading them to literary identity i.e. Dalit literature.

5. Gaijan, M. B.

- *Dalit Literary Tradition in Gujarat: A Critical Study.*


   This thesis deals with Gujarati Dalit literature right from saint tradition to our time. Gujarati Dalit’s human identity is discussed in different literary forms. How these writings were shaped and remained useful to understand Dalits, it is discussed. It also presents a broad critical interpretation of Gujarati Dalit writings.
6. Ransubhe, Suryanarayan

- Dalit Literature in India


This article deals with emergence of Dalit literature in different regional languages of India. It also presents nature of Indian Dalit literature. Further, it presents that Dalit literature is a different literature.

7. Sreenivasan, S.

- Why does Dalit literature Matter?


This article presents that the Dalit literature is a new phenomenon on the Indian literary scene. It also presents that Dalit literature possesses a national character as a literary movement. It deals with the importance of Dalit criticism and Dalit critical writings.

This thesis deals with Dalit’s identity in socio-cultural context. In Dalit literary works, Dalit sensibility, aesthetics of Dalit literature, difference between the presentation of Dalit subject by Dalit and non-Dalit writers are discussed. It includes the quest for Dalits’ identity and its global and national significance.
Hypothesis

Dalit writers write for their identity and their acceptance as a human being in democratic India. Authentic presentation of Dalit life and world is possible only by Dalit writers. They can create their new identity. This novel idea helps Dalits to fulfil their quest for identity. Dalit literature is a unique literature it has the separate aesthetics which is based on socio-cultural realities. And it helps to understand Dalit’s identity as a human being in this democratic nation.

Objectives:

- To study how Dalits’ human identity was removed in the course of time through historical and literary points of views.
- To explore how different movements had tried to establish socio-spiritual identity of Dalits.
- To study how Dalits’ political empowerment has helped them to present themselves in literary scenario for their quest of identity in literature.
- To present how Dalit writers are different and authentic in the presentation of Dalit life and world than the non-Dalit writers.
- To study a long journey for the quest of identity in literature.
- To establish Dalit identity in literature by comparing Dalit literature and the mainstream literature.
- To present how Dalit aesthetics are unique and different than the mainstream literature.
Research Design:

The chapter scheme of the thesis is as under:

Introduction

Historical Background of Indian Society and Dalit Issues:

Ancient Era to British Era

Pre-Independence Dalit Literature:

Gandhian Era and Quest for Identity: Prose, Play and Poems

Pre-Independence Dalit Literature:

Ambedkarite Quest for Identity: Prose, Play and Poems

Dalit Literature of Post-Independence Era Quest for Identity:

Prose and Poems

Dalit Literature of Post-Independence Era Quest for Identity:

Novels, Autobiographies and Plays

Dalit Identity: Aesthetics of Dalit Literature

Conclusion

Bibliography
The research is divided into seven chapters. Introduction includes overall outlook of the quest for Dalit identity in literature. The first chapter deals with the history of India in brief from ancient up to British era: how Dalits came into existence, how their identity in course of time was removed and how different socio-religious and socio-political movements tried to lift up the social status of Dalits. It also presents the socio-cultural conditions of the Dalits and literature during that time in brief. The second deals with mainstream literature’s presentation of Dalits during the pre-independence era; third that of pre-independence Dalit literature by Dalit writers. Forth chapter deals with the post-independence Dalit writings in prose and verse; whereas fifth chapter deals with Dalit novels, Dalit autobiographies and Dalit plays. Sixth chapter deals with Dalit aesthetics; and seventh is conclusion.