A Critical Interpretation of Afro-American Poetry and Gujarati Dalit Poetry

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SYNOPSIS

Submitted To

Maharaja Krishnakumarsinhji Bhavnagar University, Bhavnagar

For the Award of the

Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in English

By

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Preface

Most of the marginalized groups all over the world have a similar system of oppression but the titles are different as per the class divisions. In India it has been under the pretext of the caste and in the United States of America it has been under the name of the race. Any literary work is a mirror of the society and society is always viewed in the light of the condition of people in a cross section. But unfortunately for many centuries the other side of this mirror has never come to light. So literature has primarily remained an elite concept: literature of the elite, for the elite and by the elite. This research project focuses on the marginalized ‘other’ sides.

Dalits have always been on the marginalized ‘other’ side of the Indian society. The Hindu religious order has considered the Dalit’s shadow, touch and speech to be impure. The Dalit society came to understand its slavery following the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Like other Dalit writings, Gujarati Dalit literature is also the product of a revolt against the age-old exploitation of the Gujarati upper castes. Along with this concern, the broken and frustrated psyche of Afro-Americans is also worth discussing issue. They have also been ghettoized, persecuted and outlawed from all avenues of hope, progress and livelihood. They have been marginalized on the name of color and race.

Despite the establishment of democratic state structures in both the countries, it has been observed that a section of society in both these countries has remained disadvantaged. Both these sections of the society have faced extreme forms of discrimination. This thesis takes up the case study of two such sections—the Dalits and the Afro-Americans. Despite the scale of the problem, these issues have been relatively neglected. This thesis seeks to fill this lacuna and tries to draw parallels as well as contrasts between the modes of struggle and patterns of oppression in two different contexts. A comparative study of the struggles of these two marginalized communities has never been attempted systematically. Here the researcher has focused on the selected poetry of the writers of both the groups. Both Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American poetry is literary weapon of protest and resistance against the established social order.
Chapter-I Introduction

The present research project strives to investigate the experience of Afro- American and Dalit sections. Both of them have been exploited and humiliated for centuries in the class conscious American and Indian caste-ridden Hindu society. Voice of revolt or resistance has been observed in the Afro-American and the Gujarati Dalit poetry. The research project has focused on the treatment of caste oppression, untouchability and Dalit sensibility as presented by Dalit poets of Gujarat. It also concentrates on the exploitation, dehumanization and discriminatory practices of class and race as reflected in the poems of Afro-African writers.

In this chapter, the researcher has presented a historical background of Dalits in India and Afro-Americans in USA right from the slavery period. He has also briefly discussed the development of their literatures. Further the researcher has made a brief survey of Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American poetry which is a prime focus of the present research project. In the later part of the chapter, the researcher has drawn out the connection between the Afro-Americans and Indian Dalits. He has also discussed areas of similarities and divergence between Afro-American literature and Dalit literature. In comparing these two literatures, it is necessary to compare the Afro-American and Dalit societies as well as their liberation movements. Since both the societies are engaged in similar kinds of movements, examining them is an important component of the comparison of these sections and their literatures. The researcher has also clarified in this chapter that both these two societies are different in terms of place and time, so it is understandable there should be some limitations and differences in their literatures.

The researcher has also presented the aims and objectives, research methodology, tools used, significance, limitation and scope of the research project in this chapter. All these points have been briefly summarized as following:

**Aims and Objectives of the Research Project:**

This research project aims at fulfilling the following aims and objectives-
The research project aims to examine the expression and experience of Afro-Americans and Dalits as reflected in their poetry in a renewed way and from different perspectives.

To study radical voices of protest as found in their poems from historical, political, cultural and social context.

To understand how the Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American writers have shaped their consciousness in specific socio-political conditions.

To analyse the treatment of caste oppression, untouchability and Dalit sensibility in the poems of Gujarati Dalit intellectuals.

To discuss the issues regarding the life and sufferings of Afro-Americans who were standing at the bottom of the class hierarchy.

The researcher plans to evaluate the hostile circumstances in which the downcast have been living their lives as portrayed in their poems.

The research project also aims to examine the question of reception i.e. the impact of literature on the social situations faced by the Dalits and enslaved Afro-Americans and the transformative value of such literature.

The researcher intends to create awareness of the torments faced by Dalits to non-Dalits in India and by Afro-Americans to White Americans.

Research Methodology:

The methodology of comparison and analysis has been conferred for achieving the above-mentioned objectives. This study is exploratory in nature and emphasizes on the qualitative framework of analysis. So this research project has followed observational and descriptive research pattern. It is concerned to specific techniques of narrative facts and style of representing individuals or group or locality. It is based on secondary method of data collection. Since it is library research, the researcher has used the primary sources, reference books, internet sources to analyze the poems. To fulfill the aims and objectives of the research, the following methodology has been adopted:

**Phase I:** In this phase, preparation study of related reference articles (review of literature) was undertaken. Apart from this, books on history of Dalit literature and Dalit
movements in India, Afro-American literature, Afro-American and Dalit poets and their poetry were collected.

**Phase II:** In this phase, the primary data i.e. the collection of poems by various Afro-American and Dalit poets have been deeply studied.

**Phase III:** In this phase selected poems from the collection have been analyzed.

**Tools and Techniques Used in the Research Project:**
It is an inter-disciplinary research, so the researcher has included field-work and library work. Since the researcher has used secondary method of data-collection, the tools were the primary sources, various reference books, different websites, dictionaries, portable softwares, academic research papers, journals, historical records.

**Significance of the Research Project:**
The research project is expected to create awareness about the discriminatory practices observed by the dominant sections. The researcher wants to convince the readers how this discrimination affects the overall development of the society as an organism. Untouchability and exploitation create an imbalance in the society. This lopsided development creates an unbridgeable gap between the haves and have-nots. So the society gets divided into different segments. These gaps and unhealthy development create chaos in the society. The researcher thinks that this is really high time to create a just environment in the society. The researcher expects that his research may help to create a sound atmosphere in the present scenario. So he plans to work out his study in such a way that may appeal to those who have not still heard the voice of liberation of these downtrodden masses. He is planning to investigate their poems from the principle: all human beings are born equal and have rights to live with liberty, life, and happiness.

**Limitations and Scope of the Research Project**
Literature is a vast creative field. Since time immemorial, it has been employed by humankind for pleasure as well as a device that mirrors the realities of life. In this research project, the researcher has dealt with two literary streams. Both of them have germinated from a similar cause-asserting for one’s dignity and self-respect. And this
entitles for juxtaposition. Afro-American and Dalit literature has been a debatable concern for many academicians. A comparative study between these two literary streams can be pedagogic and a subject of scholarship.

The first important question this study seeks to engage with is whether Afro-Americans and Dalits are comparable categories at all. Since the juxtaposition of race and caste has always remained a matter of serious debate within academic circles, a comparison has been attempted form different points of view.

The research project has a very wide scope. Primarily, this study has made an effort to examine the Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American poetry from social, cultural, psychological and Marxist viewpoints. In this context, it has explored various theoretical debates, e.g. the Socio-cultural studies, Black Panther and Dalit Panther, Marxist, Ambedkarite ideologies. The study has endeavored to explore the extent and depth of literary expressions in the Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American literature spreading through various time spans. Hence, it has studied various noted figures of two different nations who lived in different time periods. This has provided an opportunity to encompass a wide range of time spans.

**Review of Related Literature**

The anthologies chosen for this research vary largely concerning the background of the writers. Yet all of them tread on common underlying theme which the researcher wanted to explore. So far as the anthologies of both-Afro-American and Gujarati Dalit poetry-are concerned, each of them covers all major literary figures ranging from all periods. The choice of these anthologies has been made with respect to the literary figures and their poetry the editors have included.

One research scholar namely Bhumika Gadhvi has already worked on this subject in her research project namely *A Sojourn From Margin to Centre: A Comparative Study of Black and Dalit Poetry*. She has carried this study in her M.Phil. research project. In this small scholarly work, the writer has selected a few notable poems. As the scope of her research was wide, she has tried to evaluate the selected poems of all notable writers. But then even she could not cover all the periods of both Dalit and Afro-American literatures.
So far as the Dalit poetry is concerned she has mainly focused only on Marathi Dalit poets. Overall, her interpretation of all the selected poetry is quite illuminative. Looking at her research project, the researcher selected only Gujarati Dalit poetry. The researcher also referred one another scholarly book titled *Dalit Literary Tradition in Gujarat: A Critical Study* by M.B. Gaijan. This book is truly an in-depth study of Gujarati Dalit literature. The writer has made a careful study of all forms of Dalit literature.

Other than these anthologies, the researcher has also referred several volumes edited by many scholars based on the research area. Volumes like *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration* edited by Amarnath Prasad and M.B. Gaijan, *Dalit Literature:Contents, Trends and Concerns* by Harbir Singh Randhawa, *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and Histroy* by Imtiaz Ahmad, *Dalit Literature: Challenges and Potentialities* by Karan Singh and his colleagues, *Unheard Voices of Dalit Literature* by Satendra Kumar are the collection of essays based on Dalit literature. The critical essays written by them have provided a lot of insights to the researcher. They have helped him to make the close study of literary texts selected for the research project. The scholars who have contributed in these volumes have ventured into some unexplored terrains. One another such volume titled *Socio-Political Concerns in Dalit Literature: A Critical Survey* edited by Satendra Kumar is also a collection essays. All the essays are based on the study of Dalit texts from socio-political point of views. Such volumes have truly expanded new vistas of critical faculty of the researcher.

The researcher has also gone through the volumes based on the comparative study of Afro-American and Dalit literature. The essays published in volumes like *Literature and Marginality* edited by Parmod Kumar, *Dalit Literature and African-American Literature* by N.M. Aston, *Writing Black and Writing Dalit: Essays in Black African and Dalit Indian Writings* by Harish Narang are meaningful comparisons of the Afro-American and Dalit writings. These books bring into focus the agonizing history of two oppressed groups: Dalits and Afro-Americans. The comparison made in those essays involves the process of liberation both in life and literature. By taking into account the issues like untouchability and slavery, these volumes unfolds their painful journey towards a human terrain and the struggle to fight against the negative forces. The record of their suffering
discussed by the scholars in their essays is illuminating. The editing of the selected essays is quite impressive. Even the selection of the essays is also noteworthy. Thematically also they are very rich and enhancing. It voices the silence of the marginalized and the oppressed as its theme. These volumes have taken into consideration all the burning thematic concerns. They are a rich contribution to the areas of marginalized literature. The writers of these essays have assessed their present and imagined their probable future and its impact on the society. They have made a humble effort to bring the neglected parts of the two biggest democratic social fabrics into the mainstream. They have also tried to sensitize the non-Dalits and White Americans with the issues of untouchability and marginalization and its impact on healthy development of the society.

Chapter-II Afro-American Poetry: A Study from the Socio-Cultural Perspectives

Literature is a social institution and its medium is language. It is a social creation. It represents the human life which is also a social reality. Literature evolves in close connection with social, cultural, political and economic structures. The Afro-American literature validates these assumptions. In this chapter, the researcher has made a close study of socio-cultural struggle the Afro-Americans have undergone in a foreign land as reflected in their poems. The fractured and depressed psyche of Afro-Americans owing to the racial segregation is worth contemplating issue. Segregation on the name of race and color has been an evil imposed by the powerful White people. Despite the provision of law, slavery had been the reality. The pity is that the Afro-Americans had been content to live in the gutter like worms only to be crashed by the dominant White people. It has been observed that their literature underscores the horrible life of poor Afro-Americans in USA. They have felt that they have been thrown into the dark, shady, and the seedy place.

A detailed study shows that the Afro-American poets have been preoccupied with racial themes and cultural legacies. This is due to their history of enslavement and colonization. They have been subject to some of the worst fonts of physical, political, social and education deprivation. All has been reflected in their works of art. The Afro-American
poetry is a protest poetry that fights against the racial discrimination, marginalization and social injustice. The conflict in American society has been the conflict of culture. Some cultures are hailed as predominant while others are considered to be subordinate. It has been seen that race is a cultural tool abused by the Whites to segregate the Afro-Americans. All this is visible in their poetry.

In this chapter, the researcher has tried to study the poetry written by dominant literary figures of all periods: pre-slavery era, post slavery era (the period after the Civil War), Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, The Black Power Movement or the Black Arts Movement and the poetry of modern times. For the detailed study, the researcher has focused on these anthologies: *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1970 An Anthology*, *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, *The Black American Writer Volume II: Poetry and Drama*, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka* and web anthologies like poetryfoundation.com, poemhunter.com, poetryexplorer.com, poet.org etc.

**Chapter-III Afro-American Poetry: A Study from the Perspectives of Identity Quest**

The main focus of the researcher in this chapter is to study the quest of identity and identity formation in the selected Afro-American poetry of all periods. The painful and tragic experience of the African-Americans in the USA led them to struggle for and establish an identity of their own. They have got engaged in a struggle for survival against unexpected suffering. The tragedy was that the Afro-Americans’ quest for identity began over the things for which he himself was not responsible- his black color, his race, his ancestors, and his physic. The Afro-American poetry came to be seen as dominated by the struggle for freedom from all discriminations. The writers also portray their protagonists engaged in a quest for identity.

The researcher has observed that identity crisis has been a concern for African-American writers in almost all the literary genres in their long history. Their poetry brings us close to the conditions of physical and mental bondage associated with their political, social, and economic environment. It has also focused on how such environment hinders the
attainment of their spiritual as well as physical freedom. The poems selected in this chapter do not cover the entire historical periods; instead they are representative of different times.

As the Black community has struggled to regain their cultural values since the day first, the community leaders began to encourage them to recover the ancient cultural and familial values. Some considered education and economic development as the cure of the ills of cultural alienation. Some believed that they could find an individual identity within the framework of White American value system. A few, however, asserted that the Afro-Americans’ incorporation into the majority culture should not be at the cost of their own cultural values.

It has been observed that some political figures of different movement like Harlem Renaissance during 1920s, Civil rights Movement in 1950s, Black Power Movement, Black Arts Movement in 60s and 70s came to a decision to fight back the racial consciousness. Many of these activists were prominent literary figures themselves. They began to propose their own consciousness. They tried to encourage their people to move forward for their own existence in all aspects of life.

**Chapter-IV Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Study from the Socio-Cultural Perspectives**

In this chapter, the researcher has made a deep study of the selected poems of Dalit writers of Gujarat from socio-cultural perspectives. It is nothing wrong to say that their poetry is born out of a social situation, out of social context. It is an outcome of social compulsion as well as of individual creative urges. It is a social document because it is an imaginative reconstruction of vital truths about their individual lives and the lives of the members of their community. It is societal rather than an individual in character. It sustains itself on liberal and humanitarian ideology mainly drawn from such sources as Dr. Ambedkar’s and Mahatma Phule’s writings.

A close study of their poetry shows that the poets wish to create revolution in the society where they are marginalized. They want to shake the pillars of the construction of casteism created by high caste people. Blowing the trumpet of revolt, they wish to get
justice for their brethren. It has been observed that these poets aspire to diminish it by raising weapons. They bluntly ask all to join this battle to fight for righteousness and integrity. It is a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest. A voice of resistance is heard in their poetry. A vehement rebellious tone is found in their poetry. The mood of these poets in the poem shows that they are totally dissatisfied with what is offered to him by their society. These discontented poets have been found to lose their faith on the God. They can never forget and forgive the Almighty for the destitute condition they have been tendered.

It has been observed that the Gujarati Dalit poetry is replete with bitterness suffered by the Dalits for more than three millennia. The prevailing social order seems to have crushed these people to an extent beyond repair. These poets are found to express the very feeling of dejection. The only reason behind this is that they have been denied their fair share of social justice and human rights. These poets are having some questions haunting in his mind: if we all are the children of the same God, then why are we subject to discrimination on the basis of certain man-made rules? Why is it that the Dalit people are branded as untouchables if they really belong to the same culture? Why is it that they are not allowed into the temples for worship if they belonged to the same religion? Does it not hurt deep-down-inside somewhere? If we are people belonging to one nation, one culture, one religion, one political system, then why are some denied their share of self-respect? In order to get remedy of this, several Gujarati Dalit poets have tried to put an end to their agitation for a better tomorrow. They have put across their point of protest through their poems. Their poetry is a voice of protest against this unjust system.

For the careful study of this poetry, the researcher has confined himself only to five anthologies namely The Silver Lining: A Selection of Gujarati Dalit Poetry, Pristine Land: Gujarati Dalit Literature, An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature, The Voice of the Last, Poet’s Voice. All the poems selected from these anthologies by the researcher in this research project have been the translated by the scholarly people.
Chapter-V Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Study from the Perspectives of Identity Quest

In this chapter, the researcher has made a detailed study of the selected poetry from the point of view of identity quest. The researcher has explored the significance of new identity for the Dalits as a protest against the discriminative pressures through the selected poems. A detailed study shows that the Dalit writers have encouraged their people to protest for their better life. They are of the opinion that they have the same right to get better education and schooling, work, healthier place to live. All these opportunities may make a significant progress to prove their existence among the savarna people. For that they should first recognize their own identity. They have encouraged their brethren to know their own identity. They strongly believe that in order to exist they need to break the oppression meted out to them by high caste people. They have kept encouraging the Dalit fellows to establish their own identity as Indian descents to stir their own life.

As a matter of fact, Gujarati Dalit poetry tries to create an awareness of the self, about the social location of the self. It has often been vexed by identity crisis. The ‘I’ in this poetry acts as an instrument to convey their agony, pain, struggle and protest to the world. Their prime aim is to create awareness about the marginalized existence in the minds of the readers. This is how the Gujarati Dalit poetry stands on the threshold of twenty first century. With the spread of education and acquaintance with Dr. Ambedkar’s thoughts and ideas, the Dalit youths are in the process regaining their ‘self’.

This study has taken up the question of Dalit identity and explored the emergence of self-consciousness. It also examines how historically and socially this identity has been formed and lived out. A close study of Dalit poetry is indeed a promising one as it has bright prospects for making our society integrated. It is being concluded that Gujarati Dalit poetry promotes love and cooperation. In this way it has begun to bring about a change. It has enabled non-Dalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset which makes them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves. It also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. The poets have their own philosophy to bring their lot in equation with others.
This vision cannot be rendered true until they have confidence and pride in them. Once they become confident and proud, they begin to shatter the unjust social system. This is the ultimate aim of Gujarati Dalit poetry. It indeed fights against the system not against men.

**Chapter-VI A Comparative Study**

In this core chapter, an attempt has been made to carry out a comparative study of Afro-American and Dalit life as reflected in their poetry. The present research has sought to examine in a comparative perspective the struggle for justice and equality by the Afro-American and Gujarati Dalit writers depicted especially in their poetry. The following issues have been carefully taken into consideration while making a comparative study:

- **Race and Caste Issues**
- **Protest Movements**
- **Socio-Cultural Movements**
- **Search for Self-Esteem**
- **Protest against Religious Discourses**
- **Quest for Identity**
- **Art for Life’s Sake**

It has been observed that both African-American and Gujarati Dalit writers are a mirror image, though widely separated in time and space, because they share the same kind of feeling of oppression and the aspiration of freedom and equality. And it is also because that through their writings, they are engaged in creating a platform for unheard voices. The idea of consciousness, self and identity is found identical. The driving force of African-American and Indian Dalit movements is the same.

Both Afro-Americans and Gujarati Dalits are among those writers who never dream of becoming literary icons. They never wanted themselves to be labeled as the messiah or the sole representative of their caste and race. Their poetry in itself shows that they write not with ink but with pain. They have propagated a message among the Whites and high caste people that beyond their luxurious world, there is also a world full of pain and suffering. Their poetry form a collage in which the naked reality of subjugated people has
been described with tears. Reality in their poems is not directed towards forming a new ideology, but towards depiction of the sordid truth of life for a specific section of the populace. Through their poems, they want to highlight the idea that realization of self and consciousness is more important than mere performance of rituals.

Their poetry has never been fanciful or utopian by nature; rather it is filled with realistic imageries. This means to tell that their art has been dedicated to a cause. And this cause is to create awareness about the discriminating policies of dominating classes and raising the voice of protest. Its tone has been different to that of the mainstream poetry. Theirs is not art for art’s sake; it is, in real sense, art for life’s sake, for reality’s sake. At the end of this chapter, the researcher has brought out the similarities and dissimilarities in points which are the gist of this chapter.

**Chapter-VII Conclusion**

In the concluding chapter of the thesis, the researcher has come to the conclusive understanding of the deep study he has carried out in all the remaining chapters. In this research project, the researcher has explored different forces of resistance borne out of crude social realities in two different milieus. Literature has been proved to be a very strong medium to work as a discourse of resistance. The researcher has focused on poetry only. Dalit and Afro-American movements are in true sense similar. Both sections are looked down inferiors to their fellow human beings. The poets of both the sections have viewed their societies within the broad spectrum of democratic values and humanity. They have quite vividly portrayed the rigid pattern of inequality in society. Both of them have raised their voice not to terrorize somebody but to make the society realize their right to equality and justice. Both want their brethren to be free, live independently, sharing all the elements of nature equality with the other.

It has been observed that their poetry is similar in terms of the shared idiom. Through this they express their wish to dismantle the established canon. In short, their poetry develops a new consciousness in the minds of their people and tries to make them aware of themselves and the social history. They also try to play the dual role of both an authors as well as spokesmen of their dumb communities. Through their poetry they aim to expose
to the dominant class people the social and cultural stupidity. Thus both Gujarati Dalit and Afro-American poetry is the voice of voiceless and powerful revolt against the dominant Brahminical and White ideology and their cultural supremacy. The poets have become the public voices of community consciousness. Through their poetry, they want to create an egalitarian world that is free from caste-based and racial biases. The poetry by both the groups of writers is an institution as well as a movement. It is firmly committed to reflect their respective culture, tradition, heritage, aspirations, deep-rooted desires and dreams.
Bibliography

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