Chapter II

Dalit Literature and Black American Writings: Compare and Contrast
Social scientists like Vilfredo Parento and Gaetano insist that in this world there has always been an elite section which is to be differentiated from the rank and file. Patero suggests, “The elite is a small number of individuals who in each sphere of activity have succeeded and arrived at a higher echelon in the professional hierarchy” ¹

According to him, each society can be divided in two stratums-lower and higher. The people belonging to the higher stratum are at the top and they govern and exploit the people belonging to the lower stratum.

Nothing has been more provocative of international ill will than the problems springing from, and directly and indirectly related to, the phenomena of caste, class and race. From one point of view, the World War II was fought to decide the validity of the claims of Hitler’s gang that their “racial” background entitled them to recognize Europe and the world under the leadership of the “superior” Nazi Aryans.

Similarly, the Japanese Jingoists fought the war in order to prove to themselves and to the rest of the world that they had the right to dominate the Asiatic continent as a ‘super-race’

If the Dalit is the protagonist of India’s boycotted society, the African American is the protagonist of Black America. One is robbed and degraded by the White society and the other by Savarna society. One is brought and sold from their own home land and the other was called untouchable by birth.

As observed by D. Gnaniah:

“There are ample grounds to compare and contrast the brief history of the Blacks in USA and the age long ancient history of misery of Dalits in India. There are numerous similarities of both these black peoples especially in their sufferings and miseries, legal and illegal violence, segregations and ghettoes, whippings and punishments, destitution and hunger, brainwashing and punishments, livelihood, employment, education and
culture, denial of entry into Churches and Temples, un-touchability and apartheid, housing and civic facilities, suppression and oppression, above all total exclusion from the social order.” ²

It is observed that Dalit and African American, both the societies are engaged in similar kinds of liberation movements. Given that the two societies are different in terms of place and time, it is understandable that there should be certain limitations and differences in their literatures. On the other hand, there are similarities too.

While the negritude movement among the Blacks helped them face the tide of racism and colonialism, a similar movement among the Dalits of India may have helped build confidence. Dalits in India have several times been compared to the condition of colonized African slaves. However, the Dalits have led life under a far more sinister culture, mostly oppressed by upper classes of India.

Africans were captured, brought to America and sold since August 1619. With this the slavery of African Americans began. Dalit society, on the other hand, has experienced slavery since ancient times. Unlike the Blacks, whose motherland is Africa, from where they were captured to be sold in America, India is the motherland of the Dalits. They are not from somewhere outside.

Racism originated as an ideological support for slavery. Slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery. In America the practice of slavery supported and perpetuated racism.

White Americans who enslaved Africans for hundreds of years would develop a doctrine of inferiority to nationalize the oppression. Once the concept of slavery and subordination developed, a symbolic and mutually reinforcing relationship evolved. Not only black characters in American fiction, but even the black writers are on the search for identity.
For many blacks, their history as legally mandated second class citizens, which is scarcely two generations old, is more than a historical footnote. The history of the South, with her code of honour, the white Goddess cult, the imbalance legal system and the pathological pre-occupation with the past has kept aside the blacks as second class citizens and they cannot brush aside their history as a historical foot-note.

Just like racism which is a prominent factor in dividing people in Western history, the caste system, a deep-rooted factor which is a shame for Indian culture, affects the socio-economic and socio-cultural systems of Indian society.

Untouvhables are the most exploited and unwanted ones. Not only economically, they are also culturally and politically suppressed and oppressed ones. Some scholars believe that the Aryans, a fair-skinned race which invaded India had controlled and subjugated the dark-skinned aborigines placing them at the lower strata of society. They also forced the aboriginals to be in the margin of the society and called them untouchables.

Another theory is based on ‘The Rigveda’, the sacred text of Hindus, humanity is divided into four ‘varnas’, namely Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. In the social hierarchy, first come the control people from the rest three ‘varnas’. Then come Kshtraiyas who are rulers and warriors. Vaisyas form the third segment who is land owners and merchants. In the last lap of hierarchy is the servants and others, especially artisans. These were the most oppressed and exploited people.

Some specific professions were identified like butchers, leather workers, launderers and latrine cleaners, who were labeled untouchables.

It is important to understand that caste and race are distinct and not mirror images of each other in nature. But economic situation of the lower castes in India often resembles that of blacks in the US.

Both the systems have provided an integral base for the local histories. Major events based on racial differences have punctuated USA’s social, political and economic
history. Similarly the caste system has served as the foundation of India’s socio-economic history for several centuries. But one of the major differences was that the race and the racial differences got support from the pseudo-scientific section of the society while the caste difference got the ‘Brahminical Hinduism’ support in India.

Moreover, although both the Dalits and the African Americans are ‘distinctive groups that occupy a similar position in their respective societies- the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy.’

But even these hierarchies are different in nature. Here are two different societies- America’s first/ developed identity with its ‘urbanization, affluence, industrialization’ and India’s so-called Third world / developing world identity, with its poverty, over-population and a wide gap between rural and urban lives.

Thus, the Dalit, occupying the lowest position in Indian society, is in an absolute position quite below the average ‘African American’.

The Blacks who were captured and brought like cattle also had to take violent armed raids which were carried out against African settlements. Those captured were gathered like animals. Blacks were subjected to a lot of torture.

The captives were beaten to death, or buried alive; they were hung by being nailed to the wall, or their ears were cut off and fed to them. Pregnant Black women suffered abortions from being assigned extremely difficult tasks. Black children, while still in their mothers’ wombs were distributed as reward. Creditors became owners of unborn children upon non-payment of debts.

The Afro-American race was ghettoized, persecuted and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress and livelihood. Racism is like life threatening, non-nurturing force which exists even today. Black writers of both sexes have dealt with this theme extensively, either directly or indirectly.
Male writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, find in racism a major theme of their novels. Women writers like Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker also talk to this basic reality.

Whites were always in fear of Blacks being more in number and the possible revolt. So children were separated from mothers, wives from husbands, and their families were destroyed. Owners regularly used to re-shuffle slaves for the fear that if they live together for a longer period, they will become united and might start working against Whites.

Slaves started running away from their masters for the fear of being sold again and again. Racism began in America when masters brought the African slaves in chains to work in coffee plantations. Then began the class exploitation of blacks, which is also linked to Capitalist ideology of America.

This has divided society into two classes: ‘master’ and ‘slave’. The Whites have been the monopoly class under this system while the blacks have been the Marginal class. The blacks have suffered due to their status in society, as a poor marginal group.

According to Walter Rodney, “Africans were enslaved for economic reasons so that their labor power could be exploited.”

As he observes, the enslavement of the Africans had everything to do with “the cheapness labor” not the color of the laborer’s skin:

“Racial difference made it easier to justify and rationalize Negro slavery…Finally this was the decisive factor, the Negro slave was cheaper. The Money which procured the White man’s service for ten years could buy a Negro for life…”

Black literature, also called African American literature, is literary work created by Americans of African descent or literary work written about the African experiences.
Black literature reflects the development and history of the United States through the eyes and perspectives of African Americans. The term Black Literature covers a wide range of works, from slave narratives of the 19th century to contemporary black literature. Black literature is generally traced to the late 18th century.

Two hundred years later, the field of Black literature has evolved to the point where there is no questioning its role in American history and culture.

In America, Blacks were deprived of all the opportunities and fundamental rights which would have been theirs as human beings. What they got from their new owners is the beastial treatment and deprival of human dignity, they were not only denied their African culture to pass it to their children but they were also not given a chance to absorb the American culture.

This was executed systematically: they were denied access to education, laws and social institution of their new land. They were not allowed to participate in politics and were thrown to live in social and cultural limbo that eliminated their past and offered them neither present nor future.

There are many caste stereotypes in Indian society. The caste system provides for the ordering of groups in society for all time. There is no provision for initiating change; and when change becomes inevitable it must be explained away.

Conscious striving among persons to enter new functional fields or to achieve advanced social position is taboo. The idea of progress is almost entirely absent in the philosophy of Hinduism. It is inimical to the caste system and its rational.

The Indian scenario was also not very different.

As Shivaji Sagar observes it;

“In India, Dalits were not legally enslaved like the African Americans in America, but their plight was worse than that of the Black slaves. Until recently, they were denied the right to education; they were forced to live outside the villages; and the public places
and temples were closed for them. The monster of segregation was all powerful, discrimination among the people on the basis of their castes. The lower class, Shudra, comprising lower castes, was treated as if it did not belong to the human race. The evil custom of untouchability was practiced and it was believed that the mere touch or even the shadow of a Shudra spoils the sanctity of the Savarna.”

On the Indian front, dalits were branded untouchables and remained outcast. The Hindu varna system imposed slavery on them. They were tortured for a very long time. Such was the condition of these troubled communities that they had neither a village, nor a home. Crime or begging was their only means of livelihood.

The Adivasis lived in the forests and caves.

But as Eleanor Zelliot observes:

“Two questions relate the situation of Dalits to the theme of race and racism: are Dalits considered by higher castes to be an inferior race? Do dalits think of themselves as a race? We should note that the Indian languages have no general word for ‘race’ as it is used in the West. The determining factors in the hierarchy of castes are purity and pollution, and the Untouchable is the most polluting, i.e, not to be touched.”

Despite the idea that “all men are created equal”, stated in the Declaration of Independence, throughout the history of United States there has been racial discrimination against minority groups.

The racial conflict in the US goes back to the mistreatment of the Native Americans and the African slaves by the European settlers. Blacks were given no rights under slavery, and were treated violently and as inferior race. The Civil Rights Act 1866 was the beginning of the movement towards equality and it made citizenship rights available to everyone, and made it illegal to remove anyone of these rights based on discrimination.
However, this did not solve the issue of racial discrimination as Blacks were still suffering through segregation and separation from the Whites.

Although racial discrimination in the United States and caste in India create similar outcomes, there are also differences between the two. Racism, in this case in the United States, is based on individual prejudice against a race due to the association between actions and appearance.

It is the belief in superiority over a group of people whether it is intentional or not. However, caste in India is not based on appearance or skin color, but rather is determined by occupation, hereditary and endogamous. Dissimilar to racism, this system does not involve ascribing certain characteristics to the different castes.

There is little class mobility; unlike in the United States where citizens can freely move between classes with little difficulty. The caste system in India is also affiliated with religion, in particular Hinduism. This suggests the caste discrimination is based on religious grounds and beliefs, with the higher castes even being considered ‘priestly’. Despite the differences in the race and caste systems, the issues have been addressed through similar actions and policies which are very affirmative in nature.

In both these cases of Dalits and Blacks, God did not ordain the slavery. Human beings created it. Having imposed slavery on Blacks and Dalits, Whites and Savarna Hindus forcibly extracted labor from them.

In America, Whites assigned separate educational institutions, separate eating places, separate spaces in trains and buses, and separate residential areas to African Americans. In India, untouchables were kept outside the village. Arrangements were made for them to have separate settlements, separate river banks and separate cremation grounds.
Since low caste people were denied any right to education by the Hindu caste system, the question of separate educational institutions did not arise. Later, during the British rule, when they were allowed to get education, they had to sit in a separate corner or outside the threshold of the classroom.

It is interesting to know that there was a direct influence of Blacks on dalits and Dalits on Blacks. It got reversed in the late 1960s and 1070s when the militant Black Panthers and their claims of Black Power motivated a group of young dalit poets and activists to compose outrageous art in order to shatter the complacency of Brahminical ideologies. They proudly called themselves Dalit Panthers.

In the late 1960s through 1970s the Black Power and Black panther movements not only gave rise to a militant resistance to white oppression but it also witnessed the emergence of anti-white establishment art.

Adapting to similar ideology, in 1972 a group of young Marathi Dalit artists in India called themselves the Dalit Panthers and embraced violent politics and aesthetics to resist caste supremacy. They were the first to use the word “Dalit” which became an accepted term for the untouchables. but there is a contextual difference between the treatment they received from their respective society.

Sharan Kumar Limbale observes certain differences in the treatment rendered towards both: 

“The plight of African Americans and Dalits can be compared in number of ways. While the African Americans were slaves, they could buy their freedom with money. Though Dalits were technically not slaves, they could not even pay to rent a house. The White masters were responsible for looking after the Black slave. Since untouchables were not slaves, the savarnas had no concern for them. Untouchables are societal slaves. The cause of the African slavery was economic. The cause of the Dalit’s untouchability is social. African American can do any type of labor but their labor was not considered undignified, while dalits can perform the lowest type of the job but his
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in 1920 began to lead the movement against untouchability in the Western State of Maharashtra. He himself was a son of Mahar (one of the Untouchable communities) who received his high-school education in Bombay.

He believed in the power of education and considered it as a major tool to abolish the untouchability from India. His first hand experiences at Manhattan where he has seen harlems of vast African–American communities also helped in his increased sensitivity towards this marginalization.

In 1946, he wrote to W.E.B.Du Bois, the prominent African-American scholar:

“There is so much similarity between the position of the untouchables in India and of the position of negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary. I was very much interested to read that the Negroes of America have filed a petition to the U.N.O.(United Nations Organisations). The untouchables of India are also thinking of following suit.8

There are similarities in their histories also. The African–American literature is known as “Literature of Slaves” which is as old as the history of human civilization. Even in Asop’s stories, it is mentioned that Asop was a slave in the ancient Greece, toiled for his masters and composed those stories whenever he could find time and inclination to write.

Black American literatures is also as old as American civilization. The slaves who were brought from Africa to work on the plantations of the white men, sang to themselves the songs of their miseries and spiritual yearnings. These songs which came down from generation to generation in the oral form are known as ‘blues’.
These blues were the source of inspiration to many poets of the Harlem Renaissance of this century like Langston Hughes, Claude Mackay, Countee Cullen etc. These blues also inspired many composers of Jazz music in America during 1920s.

The first book to be published by a slave in America was ‘An Evening Thought Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries’ by Jupitar Hammon in 1760. He was followed by a girl named Philis Wheatly who produced a fair amount of poetry and won the attention of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Another slave who was employed in the home of the president of University of North Carolina was George Moses Horten who composed poems and published them in 1829. His biography by Richard Walser was published in the 1970s under the title ‘The Black Poet’.

In 1940s and 50s, three Black writers made invaluable contribution to what at that time was called ‘Literature of the Blacks in America’ and to the American Literature in general. ‘Native Son’ by Richard Wright, ‘Invisible man’ by Ralph Ellison and ‘Go tell It on the Mountain’ by James Baldwin produced new vistas for mapping racial prejudice through a genre which subverted all the accepted notions about the blacks in America. As R. Bhongle observes:

“The three novels are the record of a common experience. They reveal attitudes of the whites towards the blacks and its devastating effects on the psychology of the blacks. They expose what Richard Wright calls, ‘Bigger Thomas’ Behavioristic Pattern’ resulting out of frustration and alienation.”

There are also many cultural influences between African Americans and Dalits. ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison was very popular in India and it was also translated in Indain languages. LeRoi Jones’s drama ‘Slave’ was performed in Hindi by a Dalit youth group in 1994. ‘Dalit Panthers’ in India was directly inspired by the ‘Black Panthers’ of America.
Historical background of Dalit writers in India is interwoven with the term ‘Dalit’ in the life, literature and history of India. Dalits have no literary history of their own and they had produced no literature till the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The names, however, like Shambuka in the Ramayana, Eklavya in the Mahabharata, Valmiki, the great composer and poet of the Ramayana and a few others in the ancient times and Chokhamela, Rohidas and some others in the medieval period could be considered the predecessors of the present Dalits. But we don’t have any literature created by these people who could furnish some account of their own and their people.

Dalit literature is one of the most important literary movement to emerge in post-independent India. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of the untouchables to a self-chosen identity as a Dalit is described in the collective writings over centuries.

Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Jotirao Phule were the pioneers to appropriate the word ‘Dalit’ as a noun and an adjective. The term ‘Dalit Literature’ was first used in 1958, at the first dalit conference held in Bombay. But the term ‘Dalit’ came into recognition in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit panthers.

The name suggests their feelings for kinship and solidarity with Black Panthers who started a radical fundamental struggle for African-American rights in the U.S.A.

The Literary fronts of dalits and African American also have many similarities. Though African American and Dalit movements have proceeded along different paths and taken different shapes, the core of both the movements was the same. Both are struggles for human rights and in-human wrongs.

Despite differences of countries, society, language, region and economy, the similarities in the life experience of the two communities derives from the fact that both were targets of excess, injustice and slavery- their experience of pain is of a world-scale.

There are similarities in the feeling of ownership, entitlement and superiority demonstrated by White and Savarna Hindu societies, on the one hand, and of revolt against slavery by African Americans and Dalits, on the other.
According to an order of the US government issued in 1863, all African Americans became free as of 1865. Similarly, in India, Dalits launched a movement in June 1927, to gain entry into the Kala Ram temple in Nasik. V.D.Sawarkar then put forward a proposal to build a separate temple for dalits.

But Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar opposed this idea of ‘separate but equal’. In 1954, the US Supreme Court judgment declared racial segregation to be unconstitutional. After this event, African American ridiculed the word ‘Negro’ and called themselves ‘Blacks’. Similarly Dalits have ridiculed the term ‘Harijan’ and named themselves ‘Dalit’.

African American changed their names in order to give up the names received from their masters, as those symbolized their slavery. Dalits, too, have abandoned the inauspicious and uncivilized names thrust upon them by the Hindu religion. African Americans underwent religious conversion with a view to end slavery. Dalits, too, converted due to their exasperation with untouchability.

There are many different aspects apart from socio-cultural and historical connections between the dalits of India and the African Americans of America. Their subaltern identity in India and America are fractured because of the way caste works in India and how race operates in America.

There are several movements in both the societies which have achieved some oals of rights and equality. But the success of any form of resistance in unequal social hierarchies is always balanced by the fact of ongoing suppression.

As observed by M.D.Nalavade:

“Hindu literature, one has to admit, is not all-inclusive and deals with life and aspirations of Brahmins. It does not talk about the life and aspirations of the Shudras, especially of the down-trodden people, even if they form nearly one-fourth of the Hindu population. Since the down of Hindu civilization, the art of writing has monopolized by the Brahmins and because Brahmins stand on the highest top of Hindu society, they never cared for others in Hindu society.”

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In India, in all periods except the Buddhist period, the non-Brahmins and untouchables have been prevented from learning. Hence, no writers were produced in these periods of the history. Individual writers from among the untouchables appear as early as the 13th century. Chokhamela, a marathrian saint, was born in the second half of the thirteen century.

In his ‘Abhangs’ ( Bhakti songs), he writes about his despised place in society. This is how the saint gives vent to his anguish in one of his ‘Abhangas’;

"O God, my caste is low; how can I serve you?
Everyone tells me to go away; how can I see you?
When zi touch anyone, they take offence
Chokhamela wants your mercy."\(^{11}\)

Saint Namdev and Saint Tukaram were also a part of the same tradition and raised their voice against the fact that the untouchables were deprived of reading the Vedas because of their caste. The tradition of Dalit writing gave birth to an intellectual tradition which journeying through the followers of Buddhism and Siddhas and Naths reached the Dalit saints in the medieval period.

This dalit consciousness pioneered by Chokhamela and Kabir continued influencing almost all the native languages of India.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, during the British regime in India, for the first time non-Brahmins started writing. Next to Mahatma Phule comes Kishanrao Bhalekar who started a non-Brahmin newspaper ‘Deen Bandhu’\(^{12}\) in 1888 from Mumbai. The movement was further strengthed by Shahu Chhatrapati,\(^{13}\) the ninth king of Kolhapur, in Maharashta. He is the pioneer of social democracy.
From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, dalits started writing and publishing their agonies, hardships and inhuman treatment given to them by the Brahmans and caste Hindus through pamphlets and small booklets. In Maharashtra, Gopal Baba Valangkar, a Mahar by caste, wrote and published his first booklet with the title ‘Vital Vidransak Pustika’.

In pre-Ambedkar period, in Maharashtra there were some writers like Pandit Kondhiram, Kisan Phagoji Bansod, Shivram Janaba Kamble from Pune etc. but there contribution to literature was not significant.

But this added into the cumulative impact on the overall Indian sensitivity towards such writings. India is a nation with many linguistic regional groups and in each of such groups the untouchables have the language of that region and sometimes their own. It is therefore difficult to study all the languages and find out names of Dalit writers of different regions in India in pre-Ambedkar times.

This was the period when Dalits remained un-unified and no movement either of the literary activity or social reform took place as it did after the rise of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. But surprisingly, even for Dr. Ambedkar, it was not his mother tongue Marathi which helped him, it was through English language that he created a united front and a unifying force for all the Dalits in India.

However, it is found from the writings of Dalits in different parts of India, that there is the same voice and expressions of agonies and tragedies under the religious slavery of Hindus. Some small scale efforts were started at scattered places.

For example, in the then ZHyderabad state of Nizam, next to Bombay Presidency, Dalits had started their social and literary activities in pre-Ambedkar times. Under the leadership of M.V.Bhagya Reddy, Arigya ramaswamy, M.L.Andiah and others, organizations like “Jagar Mitra mandli”, “Manya Sangham”, this was later named as the “Adi-Hindu Social Service League of Hyderabad” was found and schools started imparting primary education to the children of Mala community.
In the field of social reforms as well as in the literary field, because of the constraints of time and age-old sense of inferiority among the Dalits, no dalit writer stood on all-India-level to inspire and instruct others to stand erect to seek their legitimate rights in the Indian society. The Dalits (Untouchables) still continued the life of slavery under the Hindus.

As D.P. Das observes,

“The Indian Untouchables from a thick crust of faceless and nameless human anthill which has no singer of its own agonies. In social arena, it is the high caste Hindu reformers who were for them.”

He further writes that there is a tremendous vacuum in literature in regards to the viewpoint of the underdogs. In Hindu literature there is formidable tragedy of the pitiable absence of the life of the untouchables. He again states how the untouchables have no rich heritage in the literature as it is in American Literature like Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Andre Rezakarifo; Claude Mackey who wrote in his White House:

\textit{Your door is shut against my tightened face.}

\textit{I am sharp as a steel with discontent.}

There are many contrasts between Blacks in America and the dalits in India. The former has only 400 years of history, but the later, more than 3000 years history. One was a product of modern Capitalism, its ruthless drive for profits, super profits, search for cheap labour and also based on racism and Colonialism.

The latter was a result of hereditary division of labor in an ancient subsistence level economy which was also based on a form of ancient racism as enforced by invading White Aryan immigrants against native Black peoples legalized by a sacred law and a written constitution, probably the first in history, (Manu Code in Manusmriti) of the then sociopolitical order ordained by a divine religious theology (Vernashram Dharama), all in the name of gods.
As D.Gnaniah observes,

“A basic contrast between the two is that former was based upon actual possession as property, by the master with the right of trade, buying and selling of human slaves with complete authority over the life of the slave including death penalty. On thither hand the latter was although not personally possessed by an individual master as a property, yet was a collective possession of the white Aryans as a form of slavedom under the control and authority of a small group of upper class elites, the Brahamans.”

Another important difference between these two black people is their geographical difference and distance. While the slaves in America were violently hunted, pursued and caught in their far away native land in Africa, and sold to White masters in America, where as Dalits and Untouchables are indigenous natives of India as Red Indians of America.

“The different methods of slavedom in different periods in history naturally led to different forms of struggles for emancipation. The Blacks in America violently responded through revolts and rebellions to break out of their bondage in a period when whole of mankind was moving fast towards freedom, democracy and human rights. On the other hand Dalits in ancient India meekly submitted to a divine order which got deeply ingrained in the very psyche of the victims themselves.”

American Blacks as well as Indian dalits were the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings. Dalits are the native sons of India. But unfortunately they were disowned by the high caste Hindus for centuries together.

“Today the Dalit writer asks: What is India to me? An enigmatic land, a dream, or a nightmare? Or a puzzling riddle? He is in search of answers to these questions. What it means to be an Untouchable or a pariah? He knows very well that his forefathers sprang out from the same womb as Brahmins. Why then was he rejected by the Mother? Why and How? Who is responsible for this inhuman act? His questions are many. They issue forth from what, who, why, and how. The questions he asks seems to be simple but their answers are amazingly complex.”
The American Black writer faces the same dilemma. What is America to me? But he knows at the same time that forefathers were brought to America in chains and auctioned on the shores of Atlanta. The Black Americans have irrigated the fertile land of liberty with their blood, tears and sweat.

The white settlers defied their women and lynched them to death. The development and progress of America owes a lot to their labor. They increased the fertility of the American agricultural land and made it a Cotton King. They also strengthened the industrial output of America and made it what it is today - a land of crowning glory.

In early colonization period, a collective negativity was observed towards the black population. White European inhabitants exercised their cultural superiority powers over the blacks who were brought as slaves from Africa.

African American faced a cruel system that brutalized them but whites justified their stand by putting negative imaging of blacks during the slavery.

Just like India, America is also a plural society. There are several cross-currents operating within the nation. People from different nations of Europe had come to settle down in America in the 16th century.

Though they practiced the same religious faith and had similar racial features and appearances, they had brought with them the national identities and ethos which in each case is unique. In this already existing heterogeneity was added the black race with the Negroid features. It was, as it seems now, a mole on a beautiful bright face of raw virgin land.

For many years in America, the Blacks and their ‘Race’ was the taboo of the society. Their idea about the concept of ‘Race’ is summed up in the following lines of ‘Invisible Man’ by Ralph Ellison:
“To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger-Boy Running’. (Ellison 33). For many years the blacks continued to be strung along and constantly assured that their rights will be protected, while in reality ensuring that true progress will not be achieved.

The law of the land in America also was not very much in favor of Blacks. The Declaration of Independence bluntly stated that all men are created equal, yet all across America Blacks were treated as property and assets, to be bought and sold. In the due course, the 13\textsuperscript{th}, 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} Amendments were supposed to ensure that Blacks made a successful and complete transition into an equal citizenship from the age-old slavery.

But these amendments also could not achieve much. It was only during the Civil Rights movements after almost a century that all the promise of equal citizenship were fulfilled and the ‘Right to Vote’ was extended to the Blacks.

In their own country, Africa, the White racism towards Blacks has been observed for centuries. It was very systematically spread among the White off springs. The concept of ‘Mulatto’ babies (off springs of black woman and white man) came into existence because of the wide spread sexual trafficking practiced by Whites for the African slaves.

These Mulattos, due to the resentment instilled by their fathers, grew up to resent the race of their mothers. This was one of the main methods by which Whites were able to spread their prejudice and hatred for the people of African lineage. In the later years, till almost 1900, this racist attitude continued in the American society without any protest.

In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, this racism was spread out from just being a social stigma into an economic opportunity. Dwight Eisenhower’s actions in Congo were based on American greed that exploited Africa for its natural goods. Once again Americans were stealing from Africa, not just the manpower but all its natural resources. In this process Eisenhower overthrown the Congolese elected president to secure his profit.
As William Chancellor observes:

“perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Caucasian racism in Africa was how whites were able to use it to maintain their absolute dominance over the continent and its people. The white man used their off springs as a wedge in order to keep it weak. Africa was conquered for the whites by the blacks.”

Although this systematic subjugation of an entire race is so heavily entrenched across the globe, there were also many efforts to curb and end it. One of the main ways Whites were so able to obtain and maintain such control over blacks is that they won the battle for the mind. They worked upon Black psyche.

In the process, the blacks themselves came to feel inferior and to hate themselves and all of their kind. It was successful and the victory was long lasting. The well planned efforts of whites to convince blacks at a mass level about their inferiority worked very well for the whites and they gained lots of social and economical edge over poor blacks.

The writes of black American literature took it up to the to combat this racism and to reverse the trend and show that we are all equals and that blacks have accomplished some tremendous things throughout their history. They stressed upon black history and their roots and spread awareness about blacks’ rich civilization.

African Americans have attempted to protest against these prejudices and to reposition their place in society through writing their literature and their culture. In this process, they contested the commonly accepted stereotypes about their race tried to put light on the dynamics of their lives.

As penny Koutsy has remarked in the essay ‘Literature as a Means of Fighting Against Racism and Discrimination’:

“We always need to bear in mind the different factors that shape mentalities and attitudes in various countries so as to appreciate the various hues a term can take. The U.s. became the country of opportunities for people coming from Europe, building around its name the myth of the American Dream. The dream for the better future was disrupted by the slave institution which, however, did not resemble the former slave
trades practiced in the past. White settlers exercised their power over the African slaves emphasizing their supremacy to justify their act of brutalization. During the twentieth century, segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, based on the dogma of ‘separate but equal” kept blacks and whites separate promoting the belief that African Americans are second class citizens.”

Historically, America has always cherished the dream of liberty, equality and happiness. These are the irreducible and inalienable rights of the citizens of the country which were given to them by the Constitution.

But for Blacks, this American dream remained allusive and illusive. Blacks had always cherished under their bruises, swollen faces and thick bleeding lips. This racial dilemma remained unresolved for many centuries. This was a typical confusion of the entire race, they were caught between the American Dream and the American Dilemma. Black literature is a mirror of this predicament of a Negro which is perplexing and entangling him.

Interestingly, the relation and the similarities between Caste and Race came at a very later stage in the studies of Dalit literature. The concept of identifying casteism and untouchability as a form of racism came in 2001.

It was in the ‘Conference on racism, racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance’ held in Durban, South Africa. Same as Black Americans, Dalits in India are forced with the socio-religious slavery imposed by social norms, customs and traditions.

The case Hindus outcast them and pushed them beyond the periphery of Hindu religion and culture. The Indian Dalit laments as though in anguish and anger,

*What did I do*

*To be so outcast*
This cry echoes in today’s Dalit literature which was till date remained a cry in wilderness. For ages together, untouchability has been an Indian dilemma with no possible tracing of its ‘raison d’être’. Emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance in India.

It is noticed here that all the other marginalized and oppressed groups of people are under its sway and sweep. It has struck a note of the consciousness for their lost identity.

Other marginalized groups like Tribals and Nomadic communities. We have many prominent writers today like Laxman Mane, laxman Gaikwad, Kishore Kale who have made a big impact for their communities through their writings.

They have asked similar questions like any other oppressed class across the world, like Blacks in America; Who are we? What is our place in Indian society and history? Why is our situation so marginal? From where do we find our roots?

Another very important phenomenon to be observed in the rise of this literature is its originality. The writes are celebrating their heritage in their own idioms. They have their own aesthetics. Their dance, music and folklores, all are included and celebrated in their voices. The American Blacks have their own black aesthetic theory.

The Indian Dalits have tried to develop their own aesthetics which can mirror their perception of life and the world around. A black bourgeois class gradually emerged from the black masses. Similarly, a Dalit bourgeois class has started emerging from the dalits.

They all are awakening from their slumber. They are trying to re-write their history with new analysis of their past and their present.

Historically, America has a very brief history of race-class syndrome slavery. But India has a long ancient civilizational history of caste-class syndrome slavery although its founding base too was a race syndrome- Aryans versus Drawidians and non- Aryan natives.
Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, Frederic Douglass and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois – all rolled haphazardly into one is Dr. Ambedkar. There are some similarities between Dr. Ambedkar and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois as both had a revolutionary theory and action with a profound vision. Du Bois was a generation older (1968) than Ambedkar (1891).

Both were highly educated, one with Ph.D doctorate from the prestigious Harvard and the other from Columbia University and a Law degree from London. Both were pioneers in representing the militant autonomous struggles of the Blacks and the dalits. Both had life-long confrontations with Marxism and formulated powerful theories of race or caste to supplement the revolutionary theory of class struggle leading to global emancipation of man and abolition of economic inequalities.

As G. Gnanaiah observes;

“In the great debate to base versus superstructure they both [Do Bois and Dr. Ambedkar] had to argue which is the most oppressive empirically and which has to be destroyed as a priority task to successfully handle the other.”

Du Bois was in and out of Marxist movement. His major works; ‘The Philadelphia Negro (1899), ‘The Souls of Black Folk (1907), and ‘Black Reconstruction’ are all profound works of sociology of empirical studies of the life of slaves, black farmers, artisans - all of five or six generations - all under the operative frame work of Capitalism and Empire building.

For him the race-class question did not blur each other, one did not provide a cover for the other despite deliberate stirring of white-black conflict.

In India, the problem was more intense as Dalits were not the outsiders, they were one of the society. But in India Communists gave importance to class issue while Ambedkar to caste issue. Indian peoples’ class consciousness is overwhelmed by caste consciousness. Class consciousness in Indian Dalit is has always been weak and ‘alien’. Caste consciousness is indigenous and basic social phenomena but also with a class feeling.
On the other hand Du Bois in America did not face such a complex maze and despite intermittent differences with communists, he was focused on the problems of the Blacks and in his later part of life, he became a full fledged international spokesman for anti-imperialism and Pan Africanism.

Both Dalits and Afro-Americans have protested against religions which perpetuated their enslavement. Even after the abolition of slavery White American has continued to hold the black man in “enslavement” by keeping alive a series of distorted psychological image of ‘Blackness’.

Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have shown in their fictions these sensitive portrayals of the self-hatred and experiences. The image of Dalit is similarly geared at keeping him in eternal bondage and slavery.

Hindu society continues to function within the rigid frame work of caste and has kept alive the image of the dalit as untouchable, polluted and unclean, undesirable in contrast to god’s own people – upper castes.

Dalit Literature and Black America writings are propagandist in nature because they are written to bring about social change and the experience is articulated in a collective from.

Both are full of anger because of the torments of marginalized life can not be expressed in sweet poetic stanzas. These marginalized people who suffer from many disabilities such as Blacks suffering from slavery, apartheid, racism, colonialism; dalit suffering from untoauchability, humiliation, oppression, casteism; proletariat suffering from joblessness, poverty and hunger; aborigin and indigenous people suffering from loss of nationality, the tribals suffering from dispossession, dislocation and loss of identity- all these subaltern groups are included in the wider context of marginalized writings.
When Dr. Ambedkar says;

“...The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu. The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable. The Hindus wanted a Constitution, and they sent for me.”

As Dalits in India has their own culture, Blacks in America has developed their own Jazz culture. Sudarshan Kapoor, one of the researcher on this issue notes in ‘Raising Up a Prophet: the African-American Encounter with Gandhi’ comments on the history of the well-known relationship between Gandhiji’s satyagraha (Non-violent resistance to British rule in India) and Dr. Martin Luther King’s nonviolent Civil Rights movement in the USA during the 1950s-1960s to much earlier connections between the African American community and Gandhiji’s through the 1920s.

He argues that “discovery of Gandhi in his seminary…in 1950 (two years after Gandhi’s assassination) not only illustrates the early awareness in USA that ‘struggles for transformation may be shared across cultural and political boundaries’ but also exposes the ‘elitist approach towards the history of the Civil Rights movement that often silences the story of the common man”

African American were prepared for a gandhian non-violent resistance when Martin Luther King took over the leadership. W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey communicated to the African American the idea of a shared struggle with all colored peoples of the world under the influence of the European colonialism at the time.

Many post World war II African American journals like ‘The Crisis’, ‘Journal of Negro Education’, ‘Chicago Defender’ etc have extensively covered Gandhi’s leadership and India’s path to freedom.

There were many exchanges in the early twentieth century between African American and Indian leaders. There are many common references where racism and casteism are blatantly compared and one is judged to be worse than the other.
Some of them think that the Hindu caste system was much worse than the racism in the United States. While several noted Indian thinkers including gandhiji compared the structures of caste in India and race in USA and found the latter worse off.

Nico Slate, in his article “Race, Caste, and Nation: Indian nationalsits and the Americna Negro, 1893-1947” 26 examines similar exchanges between Indian leaders and African Americna leaders and demonstrates how the Indians insisted that untouchability was a better condition than racism in USA. Several Indian leaders including Gandhiji, Lajpat Rai, Netaji Bose, Vivekanand and tagore attempted to illustrate how the race structurein USA, including slavery, was a far worse condition than that of Untouchables or the caste system in general in India. Ambedkar was of the opinion that the Untouchable condition was worse than racism in USA but he might have overlooked the racial tension in pre-1920s America that he witnessed first hand as a graduate student there.

But above all, it is difficult to judge which system of socio-political and economic structure is more repressive and which leaders took what stand on the comparison. The most crucial aspect here is that these structures have existed and continued to do so.

The toll they have taken on the identity, grace and dignity of the oppressed people is more important to note and to rectify in future generations.

As it is observed by some critics: “Inspite of the differences in the perspective hierarchies, the similarities of dalits and African Americans are striking and intriguing. Even today, despite the Civil Rights Movement in USA, the abolition of the caste system in 1950 by the Indian Constitution, and affirmative actions in both USA and India, these groups, on an average, are characterized by “less education, lower status jobs and lower income than the ‘dominant’ Hindu groups- whites and caste-Hindus.

On the creation of a free India in 1947, universal suffrage was a right given to all its citizens, irrespective of class, caste and gender. So, while the Dalits (then known as Untouchables and called ‘Harijans’ by Gandhi) could vote, theirsocial identities and acceptance did not change with their political identities.
Similarly, while ‘equality for all’ as an American ideology was articulated in the Declaration of Independence, slavery and subordination of African Americans (then known as negroes) and native Americans was a common practice. 27

It can be seen that there are strong similarities between the outcome of the racial discrimination in the United States, and the caste discrimination in India. Both systems resulted in suffering by the minority groups and unfair treatment that has led to current social economic problems.

However, the differences between racial and caste issues is important to note to have a sound understanding, as they are different types of discrimination. Although America has been successful in reducing the effects of racial discrimination, it has not been eradicated completely.

There are also some prominent authors and critics who have opposed the comparison of African American and Dalit literatures. Gangadhar Pantwane believes that the two literatures cannot be compared. Speaking at a seminar on Dalit literature in Kirti College, Mumbai, on 6th February 1977, he said:

“African American literature is referred to in the context of Dalit literature. But Blacks are not untouchable. Untouchability is a denial of humanity. This makes a big difference between these two literatures.”

As per this theory, Blacks are not untouchable but they occupy an inferior place in White society. They are also given a ‘confirmed’ place in the social hierarchy. They are mis-treated because they are Black.

They were assigned separate ghettos. They had to sit in the back of a bus and use separate dining places in the public dining places like restaurants. They were allowed to move only in particular area of their masters’ house. African-American may not be untouchable but it must be acknowledged that their pain is as severe as that caused by untouchability. It is not appropriate to say that Blacks have not been denied their humanity.
The root cause for their endless pain and suffering was not their fault. The cause and the damage lies in the denial of humanity to Black people.

As Sharan Kumar Limbale points out:

“Dalit literature placed before itself the ideals of African American literature. As a result, this foreign influence gained a stronghold on dalit literature. This is the criticism of Bhausaheb Adsul. To him, this inspiration is ‘un-Indian’. Mahatma Phule dedicated his book ‘Gulamgiri’, to Black people.. Does this mean that Phule’s inspiration was un-Indian?”

To conclude we can argue that African American and dalit societies and their literatutres are very much alike. The reason for this resemblance is that the emotional worlds of the two societies are similar.

There are commonalities in their pain, their rebellion, their hopes and desires. Though their languages are different, the state of mind and the emotions expressed through these literatures are parallel. Besides, the histories of these societies, literatures and movements share a common direction.

Both the literatures are searching for self-identity. The experiences narrated in both literatures are based on inequality and have been drawn from social life. Both the literatures are life-affirming and resulted from their authors’ commitment. The language of both literatures is the language of Cultural Revolution which is in search for new cultural values.
References:

4. Ibid. p-65
14. Gopal baba Valangkar belonged to Ravdhal village in Konkan region of Maharashtra. After his retirement as a hawaldar from the British Army in 1886, he worked as an associate of Mahatma Phule and also started an
independent organization for the up liftment of his people. The organization Anarya Dosha Pariharak Mandali was established by him in 1893
22. Penny Koutsy, ‘Literature as a Means of Fighting Against Racism and Discrimination’