Chapter III

Joseph Macwan: Important landmark in Dalit Literature
The emergence and consolidation of dalit literature in the post-1960 period in India is not an isolated phenomenon; it is an offshoot of the reversal of the centre-periphery relationship triggered by post-modernism, post-colonialism and identity-war all of which coincided after 1950 and created a new milieu of marginal discourses including that of dalits.

For marginality the themes of resistance and search for identity are a result of suppression and repression which lead to creativity. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger and Jacques derrida were perhaps the first critics to decentre the centre and to bring the margin into the centre itself. The latter also talked of binaries which affect our day to day life. It is, therefore, legitimate to say that there always was, has been and will be the centre and margin is, very often, a relative one and depends on power-dynamics and hegemony.

Althusser, Gramsci, Fanon, Foucault, Edward said and nagugi brought the question of marginality into prominent focus. So now those who were on margins are coming gradually to centre. Some of them are slaves, women, dalits, indigenous people, tribals, Aboriginals, Chicanos and Chicanas, criminals, eunuchs, transvestites, gays, lesbians, pimps and others.

The term ‘Dalit Literature’ has literary, cultural, religious, social, political, historical and economic implications. Like other marginalized literature, especially Black literature and women’s writings, Gujarati Dalit literature started off as ‘protest’ literature and has been looked upon as ‘oppositional’ literature.

In India, it continues to receive step fatherly treatment by mainstream or canonical literature. The binary opposition is essentially between ‘dalitism’ and ‘brahminism’ and all the more pronounced in Gujarat.

There are two ways of capturing the origin of a movement or a phenomenon: one, the historical way of locating the specific point of birth in a single moment or a cluster of such moments.
Second, focusing on the moment of metaphorical birth, where the motifs and images that went into the making of a movement surface in a dramatic way. The history of dalit movement in India also can be traced in more or less the similar way.

Dalit is a category of self-definition of Untouchables in Post-independent India; it signifies a state of radical consciousness and seeks to interrogate and challenge the previous stereotypes that caste Hindu society had employed to describe untouchable as well as near-touchable castes and communities.

The earlier nomenclature used for untouchables were products of either cultural or administrative condescension, which smacked of patronizing pity— an emotion Dalits detest.

An overview of Gujarati Lalit (mainstream literature, having derived the name from its obsession with the ‘beautiful’) clearly indicates the predominant presence of Brahmin writers. It is against this backdrop of Gujarati lalit literature, considered central/mainstream, great/aesthetic, that dalit literature came to be considered marginal/peripheral, little/unaesthetic.

These two currents are fundamentally oppositional. It is out of this situation that dalit literature begins to define itself as being essentially different in nature, scope, implications and direction.

Like other Dalit writings, Gujarati Dalit literature is also the product of a revolt against the age-old exploitation and torture of the Gujarati upper castes. Literally, it is a revolt against decadent Modernism in Gujarati Literature.

Like other parts in India, Gujarati Dalit literature was also determined and guided by the Dalit Movements in Gujarat. The movement provided a platform for Dalit writers whose creativity received no attention from a parochial literary establishment.
There were some attempts to insist upon commitment to the Movement as the first pre-requisite for a Dalit writer. But gradually, after initial hiccups, it settled in a steady and strong protest against the set system of collective injustice.

In Gujarati Literature the dalit literary trend has started around 1975. This literary trend fully flowered after 1980. Various events and causes which took place at that time like Anti-Reservation and Anti-Roster Strikes, Communal Riots, embracing other religion, Dalit killings of Ranamalpur and Golana are responsible for this upsurge.

In the 8th decade, in the main stream Gujarati literature, conscious literary creators of the dalit society have started to create, as a part of Ambedkarite movement the Dalit poems of social sensibility. That proved very significant event. These poems gave the new freshness to the Gujarati Literature.

The actual beginning of Gujarati Dalit literature can be traced back in 1975, with the launch of ‘Panther’, edited by Rameshchandra Parmar. It was followed by a number of publications, the major amongst them were ‘Akrosh’, ‘Kalo Sooraj’, ‘Garud’, ‘Dalit Bandhu’, ‘Naya Marg’ and ‘Disa’.

The first collection of Dalit poetry, ‘Dalit Kavita’, edited by Ganpat Parmar and Manishi Jani was published in 1981. Immediately after this, a controversial collection called ‘Visphot’- edited by Balkrishna Anand and Chandu Maheria was published. In 1983, another collection named ‘Asmita’ was brought out by Gujarat Khet Vikas parishad. This was based on a collection of poems published in a Dalit periodical ‘Naya marg’ between 1981 and 1983.

Like other regions of India, In Gujarat also Dalits were mainly from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes.as per 1991 census, the totalumber of Scheduled castes in Gujarat was around three million, i.e. approximately 7.4 percent of the total population.
This makes Dalits significant strata of Gujarat population. Most of these caste groups now do not follow their traditional occupation. However, the hierarchical ranking amongst them, between them and caste Hindu persists in overt and covert forms.

In economic and numerical terms the Vankars (weavers) are the strongest Dalit community. They are followed by Chamaars, also called Valmikis. There are other small groups like Senvas, Turies, Nadias, Garos, paisis, Turi-Barots, Tidgar and others.

The combination of a high degree of urbanization especially after the pervasive presence of the textile mills of Ahmedabad in the twentieth century and opportunities of education have made vankars a privileged group. The vankars also show a high rate of conversion to Christianity which has contributed to their economic and social standing.

There are many new literary and social trends visible in Gujarati Dalit literature. Gujarati Novel started with ‘Karan Ghelo’ in 1866. But even before that a French novel ‘Chaumiere Indienne’ has explained contemporary social condition of untouchables in India. In modern Gujarati literature, Dalit writings entered with many other new literary flows. But it was never an accidental entry.

Dalit literature in Gujarati literary scene entered with a specific purpose. In neighboring Maharashtra, it was an old entrant. Marathi dalit ideology was framed out of life sketches of Dr. babasaheb Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule. But Gujarati Dalit literature never had a privilege to have such powerful leaders. On the other hand even Gandhian ideology also could not influence Gujarati Dalit literature.

After the Independence, a heavy influence of Gandhi was prevailing in Gujarat for a long period. But many people felt that Gandhian Ideology was a hindrance to the development of Dalits. the reason is – the burning questions in Dalits’ lives-untouchability inequality, oppression, pain, grief and poverty are still there.

During 1975, the problems like violence against Dalits increased and some cruel instances had shattered Dalits across the country. After some years in 1981, when the Anti- Reservation movement started, it proved a catalyst to Dalit movements. Social,
cultural and political equations were stirred. Even though Dalits were Hindus, their consistent neglect has lead them to the crisis of identity and self-respect.

Like any other marginal literature, Gujarati Dakit literature is a collective effort and assertion of humanism. It does not talk only for the caste dalits but other similar strata of the society who are in need of voice and justice.

As Neerav Patel rightly remarks,

“I wish you to be not only my reader but also an empathizer, then and only then perhaps my pain would end.”

In the political arena of Gujarat, this crisis has created positive ripples. Social, political and cultural awareness in dalits entered in their literature also. Gujarati Dalit literature has contributed in various forms like poetry, short stories, novels, life-sketches, drama, autobiography, memoires etc.

But the most prominent and significant forms were short stories and novels. Dalit novels are different from dalit short stories. A short story provides balance to a single moment or a single part of a life. A novel remains on a wider platform and keeps expanding its boundaries.

The background is very important in a dalit novel. Here author uses all the problems in a Dalit life as material and then twists the story around it.

In Gujarat, after 1975, not only Dalits, but other non-Dalit writers also have contributed significantly toward dalit sensitivity. In 1978, the first Gujarati Dalit Poetry was published in the magazine form. It was the first beginning of formal Gujarati literature.

It was a very obvious influence of neighbor state, Maharashtra. Some of the major writers contributed in it are Neerav Patel, Dalpat Chauhan, Pravin Gandhi, Yogesh Dave were non-dalits.
After some time Ganpat Parmar along with Manishi Jani published the first anthology of Gujarati dalit literature. Some of the major writers in Gujarati dalit literature are Sahil Parmar, Joseph Macwan, Dalpat Chauhan, Neerav Patel, Harish mangalam, Pathik Parmar, Mohan Parmar, Madhukant kalpit, B.n.Vankar etc.

As K. M. Sherrif observes;

“Dalit writing has been described as one of the manifestations of Postmodernism in Indian literatures. However, the acquisition of postmodernist idiom, modes and attitudes has not been uniform in Gujarati Dalit literature.”

The collective assessment of Gujarati dalit literature and its sharp sense of ridicule can be seen in the following references.

Raju Solanki writes in his poem ‘Enclosure:

“Today watching my unstrained expressions. On the stone inscriptions of time
He says 'your poetry is an enclosure. I stare. At the wild cacti
Spread all over his face. I became man. Upright. A thunder piercing the void
That stretches from sky to earth. My cry frightened him and
Laughter stunned. He took my struggle
Against the system of enclosure. As a challenge to his very existence
And again he confined me to an enclosure. Now how can I ask
My hands which. Rise to clear the cactus wall
Behold, for the sake of man”
Gujarati lalit (mainstream ‘beautiful’) literature was predominantly occupied with notions of ‘purity’, ‘pleasure’, and ‘aesthetics’, having grown out of the legacy of Sanskrit literature in its initial stage in the Medieval age.

Writers in this age were chiefly saints (bhakti Poets) who wrote poetry on devotional and philosophical themes. Like all devotional literature, the literature of this phase was God-centric. Glorification of divinity was privileged over human emotions, thoughts and imagination.

Modern Gujarati language, as spoken and used in literature today, is also derived from Sanskrit through the intermediate stages of Saurseni Prakrit and Gurjar Apabramsa. Like all major languages of northern and central India, Gujarati belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of the languages.

During the rule of Gurjars (probably a Shaka tribe which entered India in the fifth century AD and conquered west Rajasthan and most of present-day north Gujarat by the end of the sixth century), the land came to be known as Gurjarata or Gurjar Desha. The term ‘Gujarat’ emerged by the tenth century.

The period of old Gujarati, beginning from the twelfth century, has many long narrative poems by Jain saints. The medieval period (1450-1850) is a long stretch comprising several historic changes in Gujarati literature.

A plethora of poetic forms invented by the saints like Narsinh Mehta, Akho, Dayaram and Premanad make this period an extremely fertile one.

Akha’s Chhapas (a terse stanzaic form) are satiric in nature, mocking the blind and polytheistic practices of his time. Mira bai’s love poems for Krishna also belong to this period. Narmad and Dalpatram in the nineteenth century mark the ‘modern’ phase of Gujarati literature.

The first historical novel, Nandshankar Mehta’s ‘Karan Ghelo’ (1866), and the first social novel, Mahipatram’s ‘Saasu Vahu ni Ladai’ (1866) also belongs to this phase.
These early novels serve a classic examples of the hybrid ways in which the novel form was appropriated to suit local needs and narrative traditions. Here comes a very important land mark in Gujarati Literature, Goverdhanram Tripathi’s ‘Saraswati Chandra’ (1855-1907).

It is considered a transition from the old to the modern narratives. It also provides the framework and themes for the twentieth century novel. After ‘Saraswati Chandra’, Gujarati novel got a good momentum.

It was followed by K.M.Munshi’s fictions. He was influenced by Alexander Dumas which is visible in his trilogy of novels: ‘Patan ni Prabhuta’ (1916), ‘Gujarat no Nath’ (1919), ‘Rajadhiraj’ (1922). These novels provided much needed content to satisfy modern Gujarati reader—history, fantasy, romance, Puranic stories and above all thrillers.

They have entertained many generations with fast moving plots and put Gujarati literature in the sub-national arena.

The following period in Gujarati literature is considered a golden period. Jhaverchand Meghani took the readers to a specific region with his novel ‘Sorath taara Vaheta Paani’ (1937) which was the first regional novel.

His contemporary Panna lal Patel continued his tradition of regional novel and perfected the ‘art’ of being earthy and artless. This tradition found further sustenance with Raghuvir Chaudhari and Joseph Macwan in the seventies and eighties respectively.

The chronology of the milestone in Gujarati fiction is complex with many ideological shifts within the genre. Here Dalit literature came into existence not as a literary phenomenon but more of a social phenomenon.

Gujarati Dalit writings got better response in the last decade of the 20th century. Before that it was a stony silence. As Achyut Yagnik observes;

“This graduated to a more animated discussion in the nineties especially focusing on the difference between ‘lait’ (Aesthetic) and ‘Dalit’ writing.

The unbridgeable gap between the aesthetic and the ideological (as two mutually exclusive or rather, inimical categories) safely kept Dalit literature out of canonizing processes as far as Gujarat was concerned.”

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Gujarati Dalit literature in its first phase became synonymous with dalit poetry as it were and the themes that inspired dalit poets to wield their pens were revolt, protest, revenge, resentment and disgust against upper caste oppression and exploitation, unjust and enslaving social customs and traditions, most importantly the appropriation of these by the upper castes.

As kancha Ilaih notes:

“Africans, whose beauty the dalit abhujan of India shares, have taught us that ‘black is beautiful’, but what we learnt from our own experience is that unless we also say that ‘white is ugly’, at least till the beauty of all human colors is universally recognized, no white person is going to listen to what we say.

Since beauty and ugliness are both culturally constructed notions that gradually transform our consciousness, it is important that these notions be recast to change the hegemonic relations that have been brought into force in the process.

Until this painful phase of inequalities has passed, and the consciousness that only the dominating groups are beautiful and others are ugly, the condemned must learn to condemn the others.”

In the main stream Gujarati literature, the political or social forces have not influenced the literary nature of the works like other languages. Marked by middle class gentleness, the Gujarati literati squirms at apparently ‘crude’ admissions of the subterranean life. For this reason the reception accorded to Joseph Macwan’s ‘Angaliyat’ demands special attention.

In Gujarati Dalit novels, realism is a pre dominant mode. It natural considering the fact that it is universally accepted as the most effective mode for depicting lives and times vividly and comprehensively. Joseph Macwan, the first Gujarati dalit writer to receive a Sahitya Akademy award is a realist par excellence.

Fiction and real life over-lap in his works. Many of his stories read much like his life sketches. Macwan’s style and treatment are simple, but sensitive and evocative.
Macwan, the author of ‘Angliyat’ (the Step Child’), one of the three most acclaimed novels in the history of Gujarati Literature passed away in 2010. With him departed an era of dalit literature, for he defined, and dominated its idiom for many years. One of the most arresting story tellers of our times, Joseph’s work was dramatic, weaving tales through memory and music, breaking into elegiac songs (Marashiya), or bringing gentle flirtation through wedding songs. Like his character in the novel, Bhavan Bhagat, Joseph Macwan was a community archive, storing in his narratives the life and times of Vankar (weaver) community he belonged to.

Painting with words of aspirations and tragic losses of the untouchables in his novels, he created a vivid ethnography of a region, people, and caste.

Joseph Macwan was born and brought up in a small village in district Kheda in Gujarat and being a Dalit converted in Christianity, he had first hand experiences of all the atrocities toward untouchables in the area. His novels have all the characters who shaped his life in one or the other form.

These wide encompassing characterization provide a cross-section view in different strata of the Dalit community who finally had one collective grief and suffering—being Dalit. Some of these major characters in his real life are Jeevikaaki, pataka kaka, Panna Bhabhi, bhavaan Bhagat- inhabited his literary landscape and became through ‘Vyatha na Vitak’ and ‘Angaliyat’ part of Gujarat’s collective memory.

This is also an interesting example of the oral or tradition and literature which is becoming extinct. His works are a solid combination of fictional reality or reality in fiction.

As Joseph Macwan writes in the preface of ‘Asmita’;

“The poet of the Dalit poems is conscious of his own pains-sufferings. The borrowed things he cannot digest, he has to fix the firmly fixed web of the orthodoxy. That’s why whatever is in the hand is the best weapon that is his policy; his art is that where he can use his hand.
His miseries are immeasurable even the length of the epic is short to narrate that and ‘khand kavyo (long narrative poems) based on his life’s sufferings are numerous, to destroy the every orthodox tradition from the source is his inscription that’s why this is not acceptable for the dalit poetry and the poet to depart from the right path.”

As Rita Kothari puts it in the first preface to the English translation of his ‘Angaliyat (step child)’;

“A ray of hope, a beacon for the nascent body of writhin, the community of writers, readers and critics had looked forward to Josephbhai giving direction and bringing in a freshness to Dalit writing in Gujarati, in a way that only he could have.

However, some of his contemporaries believe that Josephbhai did not go beyond the personal universe to justify his claim that he was the representative voice of Gujarati dalit writing. The matter remains contestable. Meanwhile, Josephbhai carried the burden of representation and became a symbol of both Dalit aspirations and disappointments.”

‘Angaliyat’ marked a turning point for both mainstream and Dalit Gujarati alike although their perspectives are far from similar. The literary elites hailed it as an authentic voice from rural Gujarat, heard a good forty years after Pannalal Patel’s ‘Manavi ni Bhavai’ (original 1947, ‘Endurance: A Droll saga’, Sahitya Akademy, 1995). Patel’s novel had depicted the human predicament of rural peasants during the worst famine (popularly remembered as ‘chhappaniyo’) around 1899-1900.

In fiction, realism appears to be the predominant mode. It is natural, considering the fact that it is universally accepted as the most effective mode for depicting lives and times vividly and comprehensively.

Joseph Macwan is a realist par excellance. Fiction and real life overlap in his works. Many of his stories read like his life sketches collected in ‘Vyatha na Vitak’ (Agonies of Grief). Macwan’s style and treatment are simple, but sensitive and evocative. One finds his works beyond conventional realism and explores new methods and techniques to work out a more dynamic manner of perceiving reality.
In a limited span of Gujarati Dalit prose (in all, there are not more than a couple of dozen novels and a few hundred short stories), Macwan portrays a comprehensive picture of dalit life in Gujarat. In diligent, all-embrassing portrayal of social life, in vivid characterization and flair for detail, they can be compared with the work of the French Realists and naturalists of the Nineteenth Century.

In the arena of Gujarati literature, Joseph Macwan and his works carry a special significance. The emergence and response to ‘Angaliyat’ (step child) should be contextualized to the contemporary history.

Gujarati literary history has a particularly long phase of the Gandhian period-extending from early twenties to the 1950s. The most well-known writers such as Sundaram, Umashankar Joshi and Ishwar Petlikar are major faces of this phase. Gandhian idealism and piety provided the common touch to literature of the Gandhi years and oriented literary commitment towards society.

However, Gandhi’s refusal to delink the moral from the social and political left a distinct mark on Gujarati literature and undermines its possibilities to active and confrontational politics. This shadow continues to linger in Gujarati literature and blunts the edge of even the so-called protest literature.

But it was an effort to relate to the mass communication for Gandhi and that mass was more or less the elites and the upper castes. It also provided a strong relationship between the writers as an individual to the readers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Gujarati literature came under the heavy influence of European symbolism and existentialism. In the mean time, the movement of Progressive Writers who were influenced by the Marxist philosophy also came into lime light.

Thus, if one wants to analyze historically, Gujarati literature had never been through that so called literary activism. This was very well exposed in the 22nd conference of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad when Rasiklal Parikh, in his presidential address mentioned about the rootlessness and fractured relationship between the writers and their public.
He comments: ‘Even when the subject matter is related to the depressed classes of society, it does not originate directly from them but is based on the reading of western depiction of such oppressed classes’.

Unlike Marathi Dalit literature, Gujarati dalit literature had a delayed beginning. Gujarati dalit writings did not get any support from any large scale political movement like Marathi dalit literature. As mentioned earlier, during 1981, the Anti-reservation movement provided that support.

The eventful year of 1981 and its consequent anti-reservation agitation created an environment of hostility and acrimony between upper-caste Gujaratis and dalits. the very same environment was also helpful in evolving a Dalit literary movement, which was up until then, scattered and disorganized. When ‘Angliyat (Step Child) was published, Gujarat was passing through this critical phase of its social history.

After the two violent anti-reservation agitations, one in 1981 and the second in 1985, the social divide between the Savarna (upper caste Hindus) and Shudras (Dalits and Tribals) was almost complete. Dalits remained the main target during both the agitations.

But this left Dalits with deep humiliation and a deep sense of victimization. A small number of educated Dalits felt completely misfit in both the sides and remained isolated and alienated.

The more articulate among them became increasingly inward looking and their search for self-identity led them to deeper explorations of their own collective past. In this intense identity crisis, a new Dalit discourse was articulated. It incorporated Dalit history, Dalit sociology and above all, Dalit writings by dalit writers. The first anthology of Dalit short stories by parmar and Manglam was published in 1987.

Between 1970s and 1980s, some attempts were made to by some writers who were influenced by the neighboring Maharashtra. Inspired by the Dalit Panthers of Mumbai, in Ahmedabad also some youth who were believers of Ambedkar started a similar organization and started publishing a magazine called ‘Panther’ in 1975.
It was the first attempt to free Dalit voices from the clutches of the mainstream literature. Encouraged by the great response to Dalit poems published occasionally in the magazine, they started writing Dalit prose in the form of short stories.

The term ‘Dalit’ also started getting recognition and more and more people of different low caste communities started replacing it with other terms like ‘Harijan’. The search for assertive identity, on the lines of Dr. Ambedkar’s teaching, played a major role in the acceptance of this term.

Dalit Panthers established a poetry magazine named ‘Akrosh’ (rage) in 1978. Other magazine was called ‘Kalo Suraj’ (Black Sun) and ‘Tod Fod (Destruction). ‘Dalit Kavita’ the first anthology of Dalit poems was published in 1981, which has poets from different down-caste communities. It was instantly appreciated as its range of topics was impressive.

It had not only new and militant voices from other backward communities and upper castes, especially poets who were earlier part of the literary protest movement, but also poets from Adivasis and other tribes. This was the reason, during the 1981 protests, the Gujarat government arrested Dalit poets along with dalit Panthers activists and ‘Akrosh’ was banned.

It was in 1980s that Gujarati literature has witnessed a mutually reinforcing and supportive relationship between Dalit literature and Dalit empowerment. It was in this period that the term ‘Dalit’ remained an integral part of the holistic literature and not exclusive.

A number of poets who started voicing their angst were from the untouchable communities. This phase automatically entered into a more matured phase of Dalit prose. This was the first time that the writers from the Dalit communities only were recognized as Dalit writers.

As Achyut Yagnik observes;

“ In the absence of a larger social movement in Gujarat covering all exploited and marginalized communities, the term ‘Dalit’ lost its inclusiveness and openness.”
As it started with poetry, Gujarati Dalit literature was always dominated by poetry over any other form of writing. It constitutes the largest part of the corpus of Gujarati dalit writings. In their search for self-identity and self articulation, Dalit poets explored, again and again, their individual and collective past.

The pain and anger of deprivation and oppression, of exploitation, amrginalisation and humiliation, metamorphosed into punctuation amrks in their poems. As Joseph Macwan writes in the preface of ‘Asmita’( identity),

“The history of Dalit literature of the last ten years is essentially the history of the expression of the agony experienced by the exploited.”

Underlining this point of view he declared that he would not like to define Dalit literature in the frame work of any ideology or evaluate it by any traditional aesthetic standards.

Joseph Macwan was the first one to appreciate and encourage the authentic language used by the Dalits into his writings. In the process of self-expression, dalit writers constantly experimented with language as they mediate between three strands of Gujarati language representing their cultures- the literary-classical, the folk-colloquial and dialectical.

The social structures and its dynamisms provided the exposure of more than one language cultures to the Dalit writers in Gujarati. Most of these writers belong to first or second generation migrant families who have moved from rural to semi-urban centers.

That gave them access and exposure to the dialect of their native villages as well as the language of the urban cities. Higher education provided them an additional register of ‘standard’ and ‘literary’ Gujarati also.

Folk elements also played an important role in the writings of Gujarati dalits. In fact, in the beginning, Dalit writers started writing in literary language. But eminent poets like Nirav Patel and Dalpat Chauhan created a parallel world by weaving together the literary and folk elements in the language.
Other poets like Pravin Gandhi fused classical language and civilizational metaphors while sahil Parmar introduced the contemporary spoken idiom of the urban chawls (ghettoes) with all its invective and insolence.

After poetry, Novel was the big thing that has happened to Gujarati dalit literature. Joseph Macwan, Dalpat Chauhan and Mohan Parmar, in their stories weaved rural culture through local dialects. It provided a lot of authenticities to their writings. At the same time the gradual process of ‘distancing’ from the grass-roots on the one hand and recent ‘acquisition’ of literary classical language and culture on the other created a palpable tension in their prose.

Joseph Macwan (1935-2010) lived and taught in Anand, a small town in Gujarat. He has contributed in Dalit literature in the form of the stories of that region. By providing strong and vivid narratives in the Charotari (local colloquial dialect of that region), he has provided a new sense of aesthetics to dalit writings. ‘Angaliyat’ is his most acclaimed novel which has won the prestigious ‘Sahitya Akademi’ Award.

‘Angaliyat’ (Step-Child) is the first Dalit Novel in Gujarati set in rural Gujarat of the 1930s. It draws attention to its own aesthetics and political ideology. Rich in local idioms and expressions, this gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death presents a vividly colored picture of the lives of two neighboring villages in Central Gujarat.

Joseph Macwan was a Christian Dalit. His first publication ‘Vyatha Na Vitak’ (Tales of Agony) in 1985. It was a collection of stories based on his own experiences as a dalit in a rural background. This collection was appreciated by everyone – the literati, the critics and above all, the readers.

As he himself writes in the preface ‘The Fragrance of My Land’ to ‘Angaliyat’, it was on popular request that he wrote a novel a year later. He notes that most of the important characters of the weavers community were ‘real’ and that he spent his childhood surrounded by them.
This novel ‘Agliyat’ is also called a memoir at a level of understanding. But it is done beautifully without any intrusive reference to his self. At another level, it is also considered as a celebration of his land, his past, his community, and his identity merged in all these.

The author’s own childhood also coincides with the period of the novel- 1935 to 1960. But the major difference is that the entire agony of ‘Angaliyat’ is surrounded by a Hindu Vankar family and not the Christian one. But it observed across Gujarati dalit literature that instead of writing about their own Christian background, Gujarati dalit writers prefer to write and focus more on Hindu Dalits.

Here also, the characters all belong to a typical Hindu Gujarati Dalit class but that makes it more profound in generating agony as Dalits were marginalized not by any outsiders but their own people- who have similar skin, hair, language, food habits and above all they both belong to the same motherland.

‘Angaliyat’ is focused mainly on Vankar community but its narrative develops around the structure of domination where the upper caste (Patidar) calls all the shots. The novel opens with two hardworking and simple Vankar friends who, motivated by a deep sense of dignity, confronts Patidar youths when they make advances to a Vankar girl in the neighboring village.

This incident is followed by a series of conflicts with the dominant community and ultimately both friends sacrifice their lives. Not only their families, but the entire vankar community of the village gets involved in the high drama, pain and suffering which follows this one instance. A black sheep named Ramlo from within the vankars who supports the oppressive Patidar offsets the clash between good and evil.

As Shanta Gokhle observes in ‘The Hindu’,

“...It is a document of the politics of the pre - and post – Independence years, as seen from the perspectives of the downtrodden; and finally, it is an account of the struggle of one dalit community against its upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite.”

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Joseph Macwan used the realism of the period and the dialect in the language which makes his narrative more engaging and complex, sharply pointing out the enemy ‘within’ and ‘without’. The character of Ranchhod Delawala represents the oppressive upper caste community who confidently quells his nephew’s fears of a vankar rebellion.

Here, a crucial understanding is required for the term ‘Dhed’, which becomes a cause for the conflict between Patidars (higher castes) and Vankars (Dalits). It was synonymous with only ‘Vankars’ in the older days. But gradually it began to embraces all ‘low’ castes (with the exception of ‘Bhangis’) for all the higher caste Hindus.

The connection between ‘Dhed’ and ‘Vankar’ is now no more synonymous. Till the late nineteenth century, there was no collective term in the Gujarati language to describe the untouchable caste and their communities.

The Vankars and the ‘Chamars’ were considered together with the ‘Garo’, ‘Tidgar’, ‘Turi’, and ‘Senwa’ and collectively called ‘Dhed’ by other Hindus. Only lower to them were ‘Bhangis’.

In the late nineteenth century the then Princely State of Baroda introduced another word for them, ‘Anyaj’ – the ‘last born’. It was for the first time in the history that a free and compulsory primary education was announced for them and many special schools for the zddaits were opened up across the state. They were called ‘Antyajshala’.

It is interesting to note that ‘Bhagwadgomandal’(1950), a Gujarati dictionary cum encyclopedia lists both ‘Antyaj’ and ‘Dalit’ separately. But Antyaj covers both ‘Bhangi’ and ‘Dhed’ under it, the word Dalit is merely explained as the oppressed or the poor people in general.

There is no reference to untouchability in explaining the word ‘Dalit’. over the time, the term ‘Dhed’ is completely removed from their vocabulary and young educated Dalits never used it as it was considered pejorative.

To appreciate ‘Angaliyat’ (Step-Child) fully, one must understand the significance of ‘Vankar’ caste. Traditionally, this community is associated with weaving and not considered untouchable in other parts of India.
M.N. Srinivas explains it as the traditional social role of the vankars in the disposal of dead cattle when the Chamars are absent in Gujarat’s villages. Even the ‘Gazetteer’ of Bombay Presidency published in 1901 by the British government describes in detail the vankar caste of Gujarati under the entry ‘Dhedas’ in its chapter on ‘Depressed Classes’.

The ‘Gazetteer’ writes:

“The position and occupation of the Dhedas of Northern and Southern Gujarat vary considerably. In Ahmedabad and Kaira with their large population of Bhangis and the want of a class of field laborers, the Dhedas are private rather than public servants. They are considered higher than Chamars and, except that they have to drag away the bodies of the dead cattle, are almost never called on to sweep or do other unclean work.”

In ‘Angliyat’, probably this reference of traditional association with the removal of dead cattle, which has rendered the vankars untouchables in the eyes of the upper castes.

To overcome this stigma of untouchability, deprivation and oppression, the dalits of Gujarat has adopted four different ways in the first half of the twentieth century.

1. To institute a process of reform within the caste through traditional caste councils and seek a higher caste status by changing the caste name
2. By converting to Christianity or adopting other religion
3. To transform social movements into political ones
4. To assert self-identity of the dalits, for which the major moving force was Dr. Ambedkar.

At the time of Independence, educated Dalits were faced with two choices. One was to follow Gandhi’s path and to integrate with the larger Hindu society. The other path was that of struggle and agitation to assert Dalit-self-identity as suggested by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.
The Dalits of Gujarat adopted both these paths. In the novel ‘Angalitay’ (Step-Child), we can see both these approaches going parallel. As the period of this novel covers between 1935 and 1960, it was a period of transition.

The changing socio-political environment is captured through ongoing conflicts between the dominant communities of Patidar and the oppressed community of Dalit vankars in a small village of central Gujarat.

Major characters in the novel also show this polarization between Gandhian and Ambedkarite ideologies. The character of teacher or ‘Master’ of the novel represents Gandhian approach. The character of ‘Delawala’, an upper caste Patel represents the post Independence Congress approach and ideology.

In the last chapter of the novel, the Master laments the ‘Gandhianism disappeared with Gandhi’. In fact master himself is a curious product of the tension between Gandhian ideology on the one hand and Ambedkar on the other hand.

As Achyut Yagnik puts it;

“….‘Angliyat’ is not a documentary novel about dalit social life in it all its dimensions. The real challenge for macwan was not to develop a story line which exposed the structure of domination prevalent in central Gujarat. For an excellent story teller like him, to tell the story of oppression and exclusion intimately experienced by him since childhood would have been an easy task to accomplish. The real challenge before him was to turn the periphery into the core, to transform the vanquished into the victor.”

The novel revolves around four young characters- Teeha, valji, Methi and Kunku. Teeha and Methi could not marry each other all through their lives and Valji and Kunku enjoy an excellent married life in a short span of life.

All four lives are interwoven and revolve around the village politics, caste politics and community politics. They are intrigued between the vicious and aggressive landowner Patidars and Thakors of the village on one side and the greedy and manipulative dalit caste leaders on the other side.
These two factors are responsible to make their lives miserable and they both also overlap at many levels.

Teeha’s character is that of a very simple, hardworking and pious young villager who takes up the cudgels to defend Methi’s honor in a nearby village. In an attempt to save her from the ill-treatment of the Patidars and Thakors, Teeha not only challenges them but also humiliates them collectively.

Here the novel begins and also begins the long ordeal, not only for Teeha but all the major and minor characters belong to the vankar (Dalit) community of that village. Each of them had to face an intense struggle, internal as well as external.

All four characters of the novel are made of the same nerve as the upper castes or savarnas. They do not use any tactic or weapons of being a weak. Both Valji and Teeha are finally killed in the end of the novel but they refuse to surrender or submit.

Even though kanku re-marries the younger brother-in-law, and Methi lives with Teeha under the same roof, neither of enters into ‘alliance; with them. For the sake of their sons they live as a family, but as they say, ‘their chariots never touch the ground’.

A dialogue between Teeha and Valji explains their plight:

“My father was telling, when the flood waters had rushed into our village, our whole colony was sunk in it. None (from the upper castes) had looked at us. After five days the flood water receded, up to that, they (the Untouchables) all had climbed and stayed on the Godiya Hill, merely among the poisonous snakes, without food and water. Your (valji’s) father was born on that hill. Then came cholera, half of the people of our colony had fallen like flies but there was not a single pill in our fortune to get. Medicines and meals, clothes and cooking utensils were distributed from this Ranchhod’s big gate of his house. At the evening, the message was sent, “first clean up the village, then we will see”… Absolute fifteen days, they dragged mud and mire, dead dogs and cats and as a reward of that nothing else they could get, except the remnant of upper caste’s meal.”

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Macwan has also depicted the sexual violence on Untouchable women but the upper castes did not get defiled when they polluted dalit women. In the novel, a dalit girl of the village Shilapur went to fetch water from the village pond, at that time the young boys of Patidars harassed her by breaking earthen pot on her head. When she got wet, they made fun of her by looking at her breasts.

When Teeha opposed it, the patidars injured him with the piece of bricks. This incident was a source to create conflict between dalits and non-dalits.

Here Joseph macwan also challenges the age-old notion about the Dalit women of being flexible in moral conduct. Both Methi and Kunku are shown as pure women and they challenge denigrate custom of ‘Nattru’ or re-marriage in the backward community. Similarly by showing Teeha’s and Valji’s resistance and assertion at the cost of their lives, Macwan reasserts the Dalit quest for identity and dignity.

The title of this novel, ‘Angaliyat’ carries within itself the age-old divide between the centre and periphery in the spheres of family and society in Gujarati culture. The word literally mean a ‘step-child’. Because of the mother’s second marriage, he comes to a new house hold by holding her finger (Angali).

Such a child would always remain on the prephary in a traditional patriarchal home. This metaphor is extended by macwan to the entire dalit community in this novel. In a society, where the second marriage of a woman is a social taboo, the castes and communities who allow such a marriage would be considered either ‘backward’ or ‘excluded’.

Interestingly this custom of ‘Naturu’ or a second marriage or re-marriage has always remained a crucial demarcation factor in Gujarati upper-castes. The ‘ujaliyat’ or the upper castes and the ‘pachhat’ or the lower castes are identified by their belief in this custom of ‘Naturu’.
In such a social background, ‘Angaliyat’ signifies the secondary, the peripheral, never accepted by the core, the core of family and society. In the novel itself, the two stepsons never occupy the centre-stage. Here the entire Dalit weaver community is considered as an ‘Angaliyat’ for the rural society for central Gujarat.

The characters of Teeha and Valji are the backbones of ‘Angaliyat’. They are neighbors and inseparable friends. Valji and his wife Kunku eagerly wait for Teeha’s marriage. Unknown to them, Teeha is in love with Methi, a village girl from the neighboring Shilapar. But loyalties toward village sometimes override caste loyalties, and so there are hurdles in the way of their getting married.

Teeha is considered as the finest weaver in the entire district and his fabric is always in demand in many of the villages and even in the nearby town. He is also a handsome and good looking young man with a great physical strength.

One day, during his visit to Shilapar, Teeha and Valji are in the process of auctioning their cloth. During the auction, the upper caste men notice Methi approaching with a pot of water. One of them aims a stone at the pot and Methi gets completely drenched. Teeha rushes to her defense. Teeha was challenged by the upper castes and in the arguments; Teeha humiliates that upper caste young man which makes him swear the revenge.

From this event the entire community of the village gets pulled into this scaffold by Delawal, an upper caste and a shrewd congress leader. He is the key manipulator in the drama. Teeha was supported by Bhavankaka, a spiritual old man of his community and master, a school teacher and a believer of Ambedkarite ideology.

Master tries and attempts to raise the dalits at a community level and inspired them to unite against all the injustices. But he fails miserably as Delawala’s strength lies precisely in the fragmentation and lack of self-awareness of Dalits. as he says to his nephew;

“The day they achieve self-recognition the sun will set on us”

10
Teeha is not the one to easily give up on these tortures. His character is revealed by the author with his powerful dialogues. When Methi’s brother Moti remarks, “One can’t live in water and risk enmity with the crocodile”, Teetha snaps back, “To hell with water and crocodile…people like us either become extinct or we suck up all their water itself…the British sun is still warm. Once independence arrives, our days will be numbered.”

Teeha’s character is a personification of the new-age Dalit ideology. He has much wider perspective in life than any other character including his buddy Valji. He is the leader for the youngsters of his community including Valji.

Other major characters in the novel, specially women characters, are also very strongly portrayed. Both Methi and Kanku are like twins: both pure, both beautiful, both in absolute love with Teeha and Valji respectively and both morally upright even after so many ups and downs in their lives.

Kanku marries Dana after Valji’s death, but only to stop people from ascribing an impure significance to their relationship. Marriage, ironically gives them the freedom not to be husband and wife. Methi, after being rescued by Teeha from her alcoholic husband, leaves separately but takes care of Teeha like a wife, without being his wife.

Teeha in turn cares for her and her son Goka as his own without ever overstepping the limits of their relationship into anything remotely sexual.

After many twists and turns, in the end, the novel revolves around the emotional/moral dilemma of Methi, teeja, valji and Kanku. Teeha dies at the hands of delawala’s men but Goka, Methi’s son (and teeja’s step-son) carries on Teeha’s work.

He is an Angaliyat, but he proves himself a true son. The villagers abandon Teeha’s home and loom while he stays back to honour him. When delawala inaugurates the first school in their village Ratnaapar, and declares that whoever pays a donation of Rupees 5,000/- to the school, will have his name inscribed on the marble plaque, Goka steps forward and donate Rupees 7000/- “In the name of Teethabahi Gopalbhai Parmar”.

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The novel, though set in past, the events get unfolded in the 1930s, reconstructing the betrayals and failures in the past for understanding the present. All the characters are stuck in their past grief which was forced upon them by their birth in the lower caste. Through a narration of the ebbs and flows in the life of Teeha, a Vankar (weaver), an Untouchable community in Gujarat, we see the hopes and attempts of ‘lower castes’ to challenge upper caste domination.

Joseph macwan tries to put all his characters in the mode of gaining self-respect by the dominant castes. All of them are stuck in the situations where even upper castes would have collapsed but these marginalized people come out of it triumphantly.

Teeha wishes to marry Methi who is from the same caste from a neighboring village. When Teeha intervenes to prevent the public humiliation of methi be upper caste youth of that village, it gets stretched to the enmity of communities in these two villages.

When his own people tries to save him from the wrath of upper caste leader Ranchhod Delawa, his close friend Valji is murdered. Eventually Methi is forced to get married to a rake to whom she is supposed to have been married off as a child.

The upper castes not only subjugate dalits physically, they are at their mercy mentally also. As Joseph observes;

“…After the way the fields were damaged, there was still the monsoon. The seeds for bajri and pulses had to be got from the Patels. The patels used to employ the low-castes for the odd seasonal jobs and money thus earned came in handy; this too stopped after Teeha’s adventure.”

When Teeha returns after many years, Methi was almost on the verge of committing suicide. She was under impression that she has killed her husband. But even after teeha’s cajoling, Methi is not ready to marry Teeha unless she is granted divorce by the rake.

After a long battle against injustice, for the self-respect and autonomy of action, Teeha’s life ends in death when he is publically beaten up by an upper class youth. To prove her true love for Teeha, Methi also gives up her life. But this novel ends with many
unanswered questions - Does the task of a Dalit novel end with the offer of a viewpoint that is contrary or opposite to the dominant one? It remains debatable whether such a reversal in perception would translate into a reversal in caste structure.

The novel also introduced to the readers in a celebratory manner as a story that transforms ‘the vanquished into victor, by turning periphery into core’ gives rise to the question—can a literary text become subversive of the existing social order?

The contemporary conflict of two prominent ideologies—Gandhian and Ambedkarite, is visible in the conversation of villagers in ‘Angaliyat’:

“I couldn’t make much of what he said about Gandhiji and Babasaheb Hendyakar. The rest is absolutely right, one hundred and one percent right. I must say that’s bloody education for you!

Ho..Ho..Ho laughed dano: ‘You blundered. It’s not bapu or hendyakar. Its babasaheb Ambedkar!’

‘Now who’s that?’

‘You remember that photo on Master’s table, with the cloths of a ‘gentliman’ – the coat and patloon, and a noose around the neck- that is Ambedkar!’

The theory of ‘Power- Knowledge’ subjugation, derived by Michel Foucault affirms that the social codes, which are a form of discipline with clear mechanism of punishment, control the citizens by putting forth pressure to make one fit its certain patterns of behavior and public morality.

These social punishments are in the form of prejudices, marginalization and public exclusion. These punishments thwart transgressors from escaping with their individualism, and teach rebellious citizens to obey.

Social codes are formed by the powerful in order to exercise their power over the powerless. These are the means to exploit the powerless as these are always in favor of the powerful.
‘Angaliyat’ (Step-Child) has emerged in the Gujarati Dalit literature with some of the valid questions that need to be raised and answered for its own benefit. The questions are same as in the other marginal literature written across the world, but the answers are varied and it is all due to the fundamental problem of its regional nature and its severely critical treatment.

This novel is the unique output of Gujarati Dalit Literature. It represents Dalits’ social, cultural and economical issues. Here, dalits are not pitiable, helpless and hapless people but bold and brave and fight for their Human Rights. That is why it is remarked:

“Up to now we haven’t heard the voice of the oppressed case. The novel represents their voice against the dominating Hindu Community.”

Today there are number of Gujarati Dalit writers who have their own understanding of the term ‘Dalit’ and instead of relying on the old pre-formed concept of the word, they have used their experiences to make it relevant to the requirement of the modern society.

At the same time they all collectively give us a picture that how the term has changed in its connotation but still is very much a chronic issue of the Indian society.

The worst kind of humiliation for any community is the sexual humiliation of its women. One fundamental affinity between the Dalit and the African worlds lies in the position of the women, i.e. the ‘thrice colonized’ by class, patriarchy and caste in their respective societies.

Dalit women are not only the sufferers of heinous caste-system but also of the patriarchal subjugation. Irony lies in the fact that the Dalit males disapprove of Manuism, they are cohorts of the ideology of Manu in real life so far as women are concerned.

So, the Dalit woman endures maltreatment, oppression and untouchability from the upper castes, while at the same time they are thrashed at home by their husbands.
Similarly the leitmotif of rape and the master plot of exploitation are common among Afro-American literature. In the Indian context this issue becomes a twin foci of literary representation in dalit literature.

On the one hand it becomes a paradigm of victimhood. On the other hand it is instrumental in exposing the hypocrisy of high caste people. The upper caste people forget caste or untouchability while imposing corporal punishment or in committing rapes on Dalit women. She no longer remains untouchable if she accepts the advances of upper caste men but if she does not yield, she becomes a source of pollution.

The racism of the whites against blacks is echoed in the dalit women’s slogan: “We are not raped because we are women but because we are Dalits”. in Joseph Macwan’s ‘Angaliyat’, there is the rape of Methi by Patel. It also shows that Dalit women were raped on the very eve of their wedding days.

Dalit literature is glocal because it translates a distinct local dalit culture for global exposure and recognition. Whatever was written about them by the earlier Indian writers gave only external pictures of “the other” by others.

This was changed by some of the writers like Omprakash Valmiki’s ‘Jhoothan’, Bama’s ‘Kurukku’ and Joseph Macwan’s ‘Angaliyat’. These writers showed that it is not enough to write literature on Dalits, that literature should have the inner dynamics of Dalit’s life and culture which which sustain them even after their harrowing experiences.
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