



Indian English Literature

NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



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Voices from the Margins: Analysing Select Works in Arjun Dangle's Poisoned Bread

Dr Rosy Tep

Introduction

Dalit literature reflects the general awareness of the long-lasting social, political, economic, and racial discrimination that Dalits have faced over many years. Post-independence writing by Dalits is a significant historical document that captures the ongoing marginalization of the Dalit community in Indian society. It communicates through artistic expression the suffering, confusion, broken families, degrading conditions, and poverty that Dalits endure. After 1967, the Dalit literary movement gained traction, evoking the Sanskrit root "dal," which denotes marginalization, oppression, and brokenness. "Dalit" does not refer to a class; rather, it refers to a caste identity, applied to people who are stigmatized as "untouchable" because of extreme poverty and occupational pollution. The hereditary Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras — often referred to as "outcastes" within society structures — are among the Dalits, who do not belong to the conventional four-fold caste system. The term 'Dalit' was coined by Jyotiba Rao Phule in the 19th century to reflect the oppression faced by the former untouchable caste in Hindu society. Previously known as 'Untouchables,' 'Depressed class,' and 'Harijan,' they now identify themselves as 'Dalit.' This change in nomenclature came about due to the widespread awareness and teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar,

which reshaped the perception of Dalit identity. Today, 'Dalit' signifies one who has endured oppression and harassment and has begun to reject traditional religious and societal constructs such as God, Soul, Religion, Rebirth, Rituals, Miracles, and Superstition.

Isn't it interesting how Dalits have significantly contributed to the productive forces by producing a wide range of goods, from luxury items to necessities, through their labor, all of which were later consumed by the upper strata of society? They were, however, prohibited from using the products for their personal gain. Due to the power of the privileged sections, there was deprivation. Additionally, they effectively felt as though their sense of self and identity were compromised. The question of whether Dalits comprised the primary agricultural labor force engaged in activities such as fieldwork, plowing, sowing, and harvesting is nuanced. While a portion of the agricultural labor force, termed the peasantry, focused on crop cultivation and grain production, other marginalized segments, including Dalits, undertook ancillary roles within the agrarian economy. These roles encompassed the crafting of agricultural implements, the spinning and weaving of cotton thread for cloth production, sanitation duties such as cleaning village streets, and occasional participation in harvesting activities. Such multifaceted contributions position Dalits akin to facets of the contemporary workforce. However, pervasive social prejudices relegated them to a state of inferior living, marked by a lack of societal recognition and respect.

There has been a debatable discussion about who can be called Dalit writers between Dalit & Non-Dalit writers. Initially, the term Dalit was used for the people of Scheduled Caste but the notion kept changing and now the term has become more inclusive. Baburao Bagul, in the presidential note during a Dalit literary conference in Mahad (1979), said, the term 'Dalit' refers not only to Buddhists and backward class people, but also to all those who toil, are exploited, and oppressed. Omprakash Valmiki, in his seminar paper "Dalit Literature in the Eyes of Dalits," said, the term has a more inclusive meaning. Arjun Dangle (Dangle 264) also observes that, when Dalit literature began to be discussed, several doubts about its nature were raised. Initially, the discussion centered around Buddhist (or Mahar) youths as they led the movement. Later on, it was realised that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers and intellectuals clearly stated that it was not the literature of a particular caste but their stand

from the beginning itself is broad and well-developed. Prominent Gujarati writer Harish Mangalam stated in an interview that literature by Dalit writers has the authenticity of experience and the ring of truth. He becomes liberal in his definition but questioned the authenticity and feel in the literature written by non-Dalit authors.

Munshi Premchand penned wonderful fiction and short stories depicting the issues of exploitation, oppression, harassment, untouchability etc in Indian society. Mainstream Hindi writer Kashiram Singh argues against a Dalit identity in literary production, stating, "You don't have to be a horse to write about a horse!" To this, the Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki replies in his essay "Zootan: A Dalit Life" (2003):

"Yes, you can write about the horse, his external contours, his canter and neighs but when at the end of the day the same horse, having done his share of laboring, exhausted and hungry, stands tied to a post in the stable, what can you write about how he feels or what emotions he harbours towards his master or about his inner pain."

The crux of the matter lies not only in authenticity but also in expressing a distinct realm of experience and perception. This is why there's often a focus on the significance of the term 'dalit'. "Dalit" signifies being crushed, ground, split, reflecting the centuries-long living conditions of a significant segment of India's population. Metaphorically, it encompasses oppression, exploitation, hatred, rejection, torture, dejection, deprivation, and more, and has been embraced and integrated into the contemporary Dalit lexicon over the Gandhian term Harijan.

The emergence of Indian-written English novels, such as Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997), has brought forth Dalit protagonists and addressed socially sensitive topics, including the love affair between a Dalit boy and an upper caste girl, as well as incest. However, some critics argue that Roy's portrayal of the Dalit hero, Velutha, is unrealistic and idealized. Additionally, neither the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who have historically lagged behind the Dalits intellectually, nor the Dalits themselves, have had significant representation in English-language literature. Roy's novel ends tragically, and some argue that it does not reflect social realism, but rather a skillful use of powerful themes. Therefore, it could be argued that the challenges facing Dalit

literature in Maharashtra and much of India are reflective of the broader challenges facing literature in general.

The Great Debaters (2007), an African American film produced by Denzel Washington, also conveys a similar message. After detailing graphic atrocities against slaves, the hero Denzil Washington tells his students, "They found a better way to keep slaves: feed the slave, keep his body, but take his mind. You've lost your minds. I'm here to give you back your minds!" The reason Dalits in India still hold Ambedkar in such high regard is that he played a pivotal role in their lives by providing them with the minds to comprehend and progress. The man who drafted the Indian Constitution and lived from 1891 to 1956. He spearheaded a valiant campaign to defend the rights of his fellow Dalits. However, this democratic revolution is still unfinished. It is a painful reality that in India, there has been only partial renunciation of mental bondage and freedom from the "forced labor" of caste dharmaMahars in Maharashtra no longer fulfill their traditional responsibilities. . However, caste 'duties' that are harmful, filthy, and demeaning still exist throughout India, most notably the cleaning of latrines and sewers by the Bhangi caste. The People belonging to a specific caste are still forced to work in excrement-filled villages where it is considered a "private" matter; contemporary integrated cities that still rely on human sewage removal; government-financed railways; and, finally, pilgrimage sites such as the Kumbh Mela and the Varkari pilgrimage in Pandharpur, where pilgrims donate millions of rupees but there are no modern restrooms. to a specific caste are still forced to work in excrement-filled villages where it is considered a "private" matter; contemporary integrated cities that still depend on human sewage removal; government-financed railways; and, lastly, pilgrimage sites like the *Kumbh Mela* and the *Varkari* pilgrimage at Pandharpur, where pilgrims donate millions of rupees but there are no modern restrooms. The literary revolution itself is still not fully realised.

Voices of Dalit Resistance from the Text

Poisoned Bread (2009), edited by Arjun Dangle, delves into the psyche of individuals who suffer mental and physical torment but are unable to retaliate. Most of the works in *Poisoned Bread* belong to a genre where anger, frustration, and suffering fuel rebellions aimed at creating a more equitable social order. The Dalit literature of the 1970s and 80s, included in this collection, called for a fresh start in Marathi

literature. Dalit literature in other Indian languages has also embraced this challenge. However, Dalit literature in Marathi has not fulfilled its early promise after its initial emergence. While autobiographies, occasional poems, and a few novels continue to be published, following in the footsteps of Baburao Bagul and Anna Bhau Sathe has proven to be less successful. Unlike the surge in other Indian languages, Dalit literature in contemporary Marathi has stagnated, despite notable works such as a novel by the Tamil woman writer, Bama.

This anthology is not just a literary collection but a socio-political commentary on the systemic oppression faced by Dalits. To understand the deeper themes and the socio-political implications of this work, this article applies both Postcolonial and Marxist theoretical frameworks. Postcolonial theory examines the impacts of colonialism on cultures and societies, focusing on the power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized. In the context of *Poisoned Bread*, the caste system in India can be viewed through a postcolonial lens, where the upper castes assume the role of the colonizers, imposing cultural, social, and economic hegemony over the Dalits, who are akin to the colonized subjects. The key concepts are hybridity - a blending of cultures and identities resulting from colonialism; subaltern, as the marginalized and oppressed groups without a voice; mimicry, as the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized, often with subversive undertones; and resistance, which is a pervasive theme on acts of defiance against the dominant power structures. Additionally, Marxist theory can also be focused on socio-economic structures and the conflicts between different classes, providing a framework to analyze how economic and material conditions shape social relations and power dynamics. "Poisoned Bread" offers a vivid portrayal of the class struggle inherent in the caste system, highlighting the economic exploitation and material deprivation of Dalits. Key concepts are class struggles between different social classes, primarily the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, material conditions of the economic and material bases that shape social life and consciousness and ideology with the set of beliefs that justify and maintain the power of the ruling class. The intersection of postcolonial and Marxist theories in analyzing *Poisoned Bread* offers a comprehensive understanding of Dalit oppression. While postcolonial theory highlights the cultural and social aspects of caste domination, Marxist theory focuses on the economic

and material dimensions. Together, they provide a holistic view of the systemic nature of caste oppression and the multifaceted resistance against it.

Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread* is a seminal work in the field of sociopolitical analysis that examines caste-based discrimination and violence in India. Dangle employs an interdisciplinary approach to explain the complex dynamics of caste oppression and its widespread consequences for Indian society. He accomplishes this by drawing from sociology, history, and anthropology. The book exposes the caste system's deep-seated structural injustices and examines how they manifest themselves in a variety of areas, including politics, work, and education, as well as providing a gripping narrative. Dangle also looks at resistance tactics and the fight against caste hegemony, emphasizing marginalized groups' agency in their quest for emancipation and social justice. Through raising the voices of the marginalized and challenging predominant narratives. Regardless of the weather, they did menial work as directed by the upper castes. They were treated as animals, isolated from the village, and given leftover food by the upper caste as compensation for their tireless labour. It was claimed that their physical presence "polluted the upper castes," while their shadow had the same effect. Hindu religious texts imposed harsh and humiliating punishments for violating the prohibition on wearing nice clothes, jewellery, or even shoes. They were completely reliant on the upper castes' goodwill, even for something as simple as water. The most depraved untouchability practice once required untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks to keep their faeces from contaminating the ground. Another urge they had was to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be covered before anyone noticed. *Poisoned Bread*, published in 1992, was the first anthology of Dalit literature. The writers, over 80 of whom are presented here in English translations, are nearly all of the most prominent figures in Marathi Dalit literature who have contributed to this unique literary phenomenon - poetry, autobiographical extracts, short stories, essays, and speeches.

To Be or Not to Be Born

L. S. Rokhade's poem "To Be or Not to Be Born" in *Poisoned Bread* is a compelling narrative that delves into the existential crisis faced by Dalits in India. This literary piece is a contribution to Dalit literature, which seeks to show the

experiences and struggles of Dalits against the backdrop of a deeply entrenched caste system. The title poses a philosophical and existential dilemma, reflecting the profound anguish and dehumanization experienced by those relegated to the lowest rungs of society. The central theme of *To Be or Not to Be Born* is the pervasive and brutal caste-based discrimination that Dalits endure. Rokhade vividly portrays the systemic marginalization and violence inflicted upon Dalits, highlighting the social, economic, and psychological toll of caste oppression. The narrative underscores the dehumanization and stigmatization that Dalits face, which often leads to an existential questioning of the very value of life. The existential dilemma Dalits face is summed up in the work's title. *To Be or Not to Be Born* reflects a sense of despair and hopelessness, questioning the worth of existence in a society that denies basic human dignity and rights.

"I, still in your womb, was wondering
Do I want to be born-
Do I want to be born at all
in this land? (Rokhade 5 - 8)"

Rokhade critiques social structures perpetuating inequality and calls for change in "To Be or Not to Be Born." The work reflects historical injustices faced by Dalits and the ongoing struggle for equality and human rights. With themes of social injustice, existential dilemma, and resistance, it serves as a critique of social structures and a call to action for change. Rokhade's contribution to Dalit literature articulates the pain, resilience, and aspirations of a marginalized community, making it essential for understanding the complexities of caste in India.

Send My Boy to School

Send My Boy to School by Waman Kardak is a plea for empowerment through education. This poem represents the connection between caste, poverty, and the transformative power of education. Written in the context of the Dalit struggle for equality in India, the poem is intended as both a cry for help and a demand for justice. Kardak's work resonates with the broader Dalit literary movement, which seeks to articulate the experiences and aspirations of the historically oppressed Dalit community. He was born at a time when Dalits faced severe social and economic marginalization and emerged as a powerful voice advocating for Dalit rights.

The central theme of *Send My Boy to School* revolves around the transformative potential of education. Kardak poignantly portrays the struggles of Dalit parents who, despite their poverty, see education as the key to a better future for their children.

“Send my boy to school
 Lord and master
 ...
 We may be terribly poor
 Famine may knock at our door
 I’ll see that he gets to school (Kardak 1-2, 4-8)”

The poem expresses the desperate hope that education can break the chains of caste-based discrimination and open doors to opportunities that have been denied to Dalits. The school represents hope and a path to empowerment. The recurring motif of the “boy” represents the future generation of Dalits, whose lives can be fundamentally changed through access to education. The contrast between the bleakness of their current existence and the brightness of an educated future is starkly drawn, highlighting the urgency of the plea. The poem’s emotional appeal lies in its depiction of parental love and sacrifice. The plea to “send my boy to school” is not just a request but a heartfelt cry born out of the deep desire for a better life for one’s child.

“If my clothes are torn, what do I care?
 My boy must never go bare
 What use I do have for a jewel?
 Send my boy to school, etc. (Kardak 13-16)”

Kardak’s portrayal of the parents’ willingness to endure hardship for the sake of their child’s education resonates with universal themes of parental love and sacrifice, making the poem relatable and powerful. Kardak highlights the economic challenges, social ostracism, and lack of resources that Dalit families face. By bringing these issues to the forefront, Kardak challenges the reader to confront the realities of caste discrimination and to acknowledge the role of education in addressing these inequities. This poem is more than just a literary piece; it is a call to action. It underscores the critical importance of education in the fight against caste-based oppression and poverty.

A Corpse in the Well

The autobiographical extract of Shankarrao Kharat's *A Corpse in the Well* depicts caste atrocities in a harrowing manner. A stark and disturbing portrayal of India's long-standing caste discrimination. Kharat, a well-known figure in Dalit literature, uses this story to shed light on the harsh realities that Dalits face. Shankarrao Kharat, a well-known Dalit writer, has played an important role in bringing Dalits' experiences to the forefront of Indian literature. Untouchability and Dalit social ostracism are central themes in the story. The story exposes upper-caste communities' inhumane treatment of Dalits.

"The sight of the corpse in the well had a devastating impact on the entire village. The well, once a source of life, had now become a harbinger of death and despair." (Kharat 112)"

The plot centers around the discovery of a corpse in a well, a source of drinking water for the village. Ironically, the well, which represents life and sustenance, becomes a site of death and contamination. This stark contrast demonstrates the extent to which caste discrimination pervades daily life. The corpse represents Dalits' marginalized and oppressed status, whose lives are considered disposable by upper-caste society. The Dalit characters, despite their suffering, exhibit dignity and resilience. In contrast, the upper-caste characters display arrogance and callousness, highlighting the moral corruption that accompanies caste privilege.

"The upper-caste villagers stood at a distance, their faces twisted in disgust. 'How dare they pollute our well,' one of them spat out, as if the very presence of the Dalit corpse was a deliberate act of defiance. (Kharat 114)"

Kharat's nuanced portrayal of these characters serves to humanize the Dalits while critiquing the dehumanizing attitudes of the upper castes. The story is a scathing critique of systemic inequalities and social norms that perpetuate caste hierarchies. Kharat advocates a radical transformation of society based on equality, justice, and human dignity. His work aligns with the larger Dalit movement that seeks to dismantle caste-based oppression and promote social justice.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how the anthology functions as a

powerful sociopolitical document that not only reflects the harsh reality of caste-based oppression, but also the Dalit community's tenacity and resistance, using postcolonial and Marxist theoretical frameworks. We looked at how the anthology emphasizes themes of hybridity, subalternity, mimicry, and resistance through the lens of postcolonial theory. The interactions between cultural and social factors that influence Dalit identities and experiences are made clear by these themes. The poems, essays, and stories in the book "Poisoned Bread" allow Dalit voices to challenge dominant upper-caste narratives and assert their rightful place in India's sociocultural landscape. Similarly, the anthology's depiction of the economic aspects of caste oppression has been illuminated by the use of Marxist theory. The stories focus on Dalits' material hardships and exploitation, linking their socioeconomic struggles to broader class struggles. The critique of dominant ideologies and emphasis on class consciousness help us better understand the systemic basis of caste-based inequality. "Poisoned Bread" recognizes Dalits' defiance and aspirations for justice and equality while also emphasizing their hardship and marginalization. The anthology's comprehensive collection of individual and group experiences encourages readers to recognize and confront the system's ingrained injustices, while also serving as a historical record. Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of Dalit literature in scholarly discourse and social change. When we approach "Poisoned Bread" through a postcolonial and Marxist lens, we can gain a better understanding of the nuances and complexities of Dalit experiences which serves as a valuable resource for understanding the intersections of caste, class, and resistance in modern India, as well as a tribute to the Dalit community's tenacity.

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