

Spitting at Power: The Boom in Dalit Literature and Questions of Agency

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Dalit literature is an emerging canon in India. As such, it remains deeply implicated in questions of agency—who writes? who is published? why? and, how do representations in Dalit texts assert Dalit agency or respond to curtailment of such agency? These and similar questions suggest ways to talk critically about Dalit literature in a manner that recognizes important themes and important contextual facts, and allows comparison with other emergent canons around the world. The production of an adequate critical framework for the exploration of Dalit literature is an ongoing task, and attention to questions of agency is one way to contribute to this project. *Keywords:* Dalit literature, agency

The varna-jati complex, otherwise known as caste, is not the burden of Dalits alone, any more than race in the United States is the burden of African Americans alone. In this sense, Dalit Studies should be distinguished from Caste Studies. When it comes to literature, then, the vagaries of "caste discrimination" can and should be tracked across texts produced by a wide variety of writers—even as it is reasonable to expect that Dalit voices offer unique perspectives on the varna-jati complex.

Dalit struggles with the varna-jati complex manifest themselves in literary works in a variety of ways, neither easily nor usefully summarized. This essay takes up one important thread of such contestation in what has been called the Boom in Dalit literature. How do Dalit literary texts conceptualize and engage questions of agency in the face of that configuration of power that is the varna-jati complex? This question is at the heart of the exploration that follows. I begin by reading representative texts for their explorations of Dalit agency, and conclude by offering formulations meant to indicate connections with a broad range of critical preoccupations in postcolonial studies in general.

Questions of Agency in the Boom in Dalit Literature

A literary revolution, largely unnoticed outside, is afoot in India. The lives and experiences of Dalits, formerly known as Untouchables, are pouring forth in several languages. Novels, poems and autobiographies written in the last thirty years or so in Marathi, Hindi and Tamil, amongst other languages, have begun to carve out a space in mainstream culture from which Dalit voices were once largely excluded. It would be a mistake to regard this literary boom as without precedent in centuries of Dalit cultural

⁹ Hannah Arendt "The Modern Concept of History" *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Twentieth Anniversary Issue: I (Oct., 1958), pp. 570-590.

¹⁰ For a theoretically astute and complex reading of Fanon's theory of history and temporality see R. Radhakrishnan's *History, the Human, and the World Between*, (Duke UP, 2008) especially pp. 71-113.

expression. By some accounts, Tiruvalluvar, the author of the *Thirukural*, the revered classical Tamil text generally attributed to about two thousand years ago, was a Dalit. In contrast, P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, one of the first Dalit novels in Tamil, was written as recently as 1995. Out of the shadowy margins of folk culture and the dim memory of ancient or contested written traditions, then, Dalit literature is moving to a new prominence in cultural precincts formerly closed to Dalits—that is, in modern genres. Little of this emerging literature has been translated, and hardly any is written originally in English. Still, accompanied by review attention in national newspapers, the lists of large and small English-language publishing houses—Penguin India as well as Samya—have begun to make room for Dalit writers.

The social context for this boom, to put not too fine a point on it, is crushing oppression under a system popularly known as caste, but more accurately rendered, in V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai's words, as "varna-jati complex" (xx). Caste in contemporary India, like race in America to which it is often compared, is a complicated phenomenon.¹ The oppression to which Dalits continue to be subjected, even as they have made significant advances, range from the subtle but iron grip of routine tradition to deadly assault by physical force. As is well known, tea shops in some villages in South India still maintain a "two-glass" system, one glass for Dalits and another for non-Dalit clients whose purer lips must be preserved from defilement; and in 1997 in Laxmanpur-Bathe in the North Indian state of Bihar, fifty-eight Dalits were massacred by an upper-caste gang over land. Sometimes such caste violence targets women in horrific ways. In the notorious 2006 case of Khairlanji in Western India, Dalit women were raped and paraded naked in public before being murdered with male family members, again over a land dispute. Violence against Dalits combines monstrous social prejudice with narrow economic calculation.²

In an important sense, the very existence of a boom in Dalit literature may be seen as an assertion of Dalit agency in the face of varna-jati power. Throughout the twentieth century, the social system of the varna-jati complex, shaken up by British colonialism in some ways and reinforced in others, was an abiding concern for Indian social reformers of all stripes. While Gandhi renamed Untouchables Harijans (or the Children of God) and considered the eradication of untouchability from Hindu practice of vital importance, his opposition to the varna-jati complex itself was, as is well known, ambivalent. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, the fierce non-Dalit critic of varna-jati oppression, left Gandhi's Indian National Congress in the early twentieth century because of his disgust at the so-called Mahatma's accommodationist attitude to some abhorrent varna-jati practices. As well known are the frequent and public feuds with Gandhi of B. R. Ambedkar, certainly the most important figure in contemporary Dalit politics, over questions of caste. Despite his status as the Father of the Indian Constitution, a few months before his death in 1956 Ambedkar converted to Buddhism with some of his followers as a protest against the continuing implacability

of varna-jati practices in Hindu-majority India. The significant body of writing he has left behind, the most important of which are conveniently gathered in the volume *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* edited by Valerian Rodrigues, is a powerful inspiration to Dalit writers and political activists from all over India. It is in this context of an unfolding of Dalit political agency, captured somewhat telegraphically here in this paragraph, that the contemporary boom in Dalit literature may itself be understood as a contestation and rearticulation of power. Literature, conventionally understood, becomes *one* domain for the posing and answering of questions of agency.

In its origins, the ongoing boom in Dalit literature is in a general sense Ambedkarite in inspiration. The pioneering work done by Marathi writers during the Sixties and Seventies was under the profound influence of Ambedkar. A key document here—a masterpiece of rhetorical statement—is the Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto, originally issued in 1973 in Marathi, is broadly humanistic in conception even as it is relentless in its critique of the varna-jati complex and in its advocacy of Dalit aspirations. As a group, the Dalit Panthers were short-lived but their ideas continue to exert a significant influence, often unacknowledged, in the literary efflorescence that followed first in Marathi and then in other languages.

The theme of agency appears in the Dalit Panthers manifesto through symptomatic phrases that both borrow from a global language of struggle—"complete revolution," "people's democracy"—and at the same time assert a particular perspective—"attack untouchability"—and that culminates finally in the declaration that Dalits "must themselves become rulers" (146-147). Agency here comes to be measured through the plenitude of political subjectivity—to rule rather than be ruled. The very genre of a manifesto too is expressive of agency, since it is in its nature to engage in a call to action. Within the context of an aspiration to political subjectivity, then, the Dalit Panthers manifesto sets out to assert the agency of Dalits in multiple ways. I have written at length elsewhere about the rich and paradoxical nature of the manifesto's claim to humanism in which *Dalit* is redefined to include so-called untouchables as well as other oppressed communities (67-74). The broad view that the manifesto takes on the question of who is a Dalit represents a multifaceted engagement with possible modes of agency.

This multifacetedness is easily evident in the landmark 1992 anthology *Poisoned Bread*, edited by Arjun Dangle, which advances the notion of a committed Dalit literature, that is, a literature filled with oppositional and resistant intentionality. Speaking truth to power—the power congealed in the varna-jati complex—is a common thread in this collection, as seen in the works by several major figures of the seminal Dalit writing in Marathi gathered in translation. Ambedkar is in this anthology as are Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar, who are all amongst the most prominent figures of the Dalit literary movement in Marathi.

In an essay titled "Dalit Literature: Past, Present, and Future" included in the anthology, Dangle declares Ambedkar the "Father of Dalit literature" and adds: "It is significant that Dalit literature owes its origins to a revolutionary struggle for social and economic change. This explains the various aspects of serious thought in Dalit literature. This literature is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who as untouchables are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. Their literature is thus characterized by a feeling of rebellion against the establishment, of negativism and scientificity" (237). It is in this literary critical context that we should reconnoiter and recognize the theme of agency in Dalit literature.

The theme of agency manifests itself in an evocative manner in the work of Narayan Surve, not included in Dangle's anthology but mentioned by him in his essay, who on his death in 2010 was extolled in an obituary in *The Times of India*: "Known as the first Dalit poet, Surve cleared the decks for... the iconic Dalit movement." By the time of his death, Surve had won many honors in India and elsewhere, but he grew up orphaned in the streets of Mumbai and wrote of the city's underclass. Here is "Lifetime":

A whole lifetime assigned to me;
even the light when I was born
was assigned to me;
I said the things I was assigned to say.
Cursing under my breath,
I walked the street assigned to me;
I came back to the room
assigned to me;
I lived the life I was assigned to live.
They say we go to heaven
if we follow the path assigned to us.
Between the four pillars assigned to us
I spit:
there.

Trans. from Marathi by Vinay Dharwadkar (159)

Like Shakespeare's Caliban, Surve's poetic persona wrestles an assigned language to a contrary imprecatory end. "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse," Shakespeare's Caliban says to Prospero and Miranda (*The Tempest*, Act I Scene 2), and so does the speaker of this poem to "they," the orthodox non-Dalit readers. In the essay cited above, Dangle notes: "The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it" (235-36). To the abiding horror of many of Surve's readers, the speaker's contaminating spit pollutes not only the space between the four pillars (of the varna-jati complex?) doled out by them to the speaker but also the very page they hold between their fingers—there! Will the life of the speaker in the poem be determined (assigned) by the varna-jati complex?

Or, rather, will the speaker find a way to assert self against the constricting forces? Spitting becomes a resistant response to these questions.

Similar questions of agency are to be found in Dalit literature in Tamil, which has gained a new visibility since the late Eighties. Works by Sivakami, Bama (memoirist and novelist), Imayam (novelist), Unjai Rajan (short story writer and editor), Gunasekaran (playwright), Raj Kautaman (critic) and Inquilab (poet) assert, critique and/or more generally explore the varied dimensions of agency. Unfortunately, little of this literature is translated into English or conveniently gathered in anthologies. Amongst the exceptions are Sivakami's novel, translated by herself, and Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*, which shook the Tamil literary scene with its frank depictions of ghetto life.

Worth mentioning here is *Viramma*, a work whose genre poses the question of agency with unusual piquancy. *Viramma* is a collaboration between a Dalit woman of that name and Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine, two Paris-based anthropologists. It is modeled on the testimonios familiar to us from Latin America, such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The Racines interviewed Viramma in Tamil and then composed the book in French from which the English Verso translation was prepared. In his widely-cited work, John Beverley regards testimonios as disrupting typical aesthetic arrangements. By offering novel models of collaboration and authorship, testimonios in Beverley's opinion generically undo cultural structures of hierarchy. He regards a testimonio as defining "new paradigms for the relationship between the intelligentsia and the popular classes. In this sense, it represents a new type of aesthetic agency in political struggles" (61). With regard to the Latin American works that are his primary texts, Beverley makes a mostly persuasive case for the applicability of his notion of a testimonio as a distillation of novel aesthetic agency. However, *Viramma* troubles this utopian notion.

Viramma is a vivid and often moving representation of an ordinary Tamil Dalit woman who one moment excoriates the caste system and the next reproduces its oppressive ideology in her own words. To what extent is the text of *Viramma* shaped by the pressure of the Racines' editorship? And in what ways do the occasional remarks of Viramma suggestive of an accommodation of the varna-jati complex relate to a more militant Dalit movement (which did not yet exist in its most expansive forms at the time of the interviews)? These questions are implicated in the quasi-ethnographic nature of the book and cannot be answered separately from the book's status as a testimonio. *Viramma* suggests that testimonios need not represent progressive aesthetic agency; but approaching a Dalit text such as *Viramma* through the generic lens of a testimonio reveals the centrality of questions of agency to Dalit literature.

Questions of agency are more conventionally explored in what is perhaps the most celebrated work of the Dalit boom literature in Tamil—Bama's 1992 memoir *Karukku*, also available under the same title in English translation. Since Bama is a Christian Dalit, this memoir serves to

underscore that Dalit oppression is not restricted to the Hindu community. In one famous passage, Bama describes a traumatic childhood experience in which she witnesses an older Dalit man walking down the street dangling a packet of food from a string in his hand. She laughs at the absurd sight until her older brother angrily parses the scene for her—the Dalit man is prohibited from touching the parcel of food directly with his fingers for he would then pollute it. The innocence of childhood is shattered. Many years later, Bama becomes a nun and then is forced to leave the Church because she finds varna-jati hierarchies reproduced there. The memoir ends with her determination to make her independent way in the world. Like many other Dalit life narratives, Bama's memoir, which won a national award, is written in a language that revises received notions of literary propriety. In a pioneering language, it movingly depicts her painful attempts to reintegrate her self in the face of casteism.

Aside from works by Dalit writers, books like Perumal Murugan's 2000 novel *Seasons of the Palm*, wonderfully translated by V. Geetha from the Tamil, too explore questions of agency in instructive ways. Murugan may not be a Dalit writer but his novel is an incisive exploration of the limits and opportunities of Dalit children. The central character is a young adolescent boy named Shortie, who is bonded to his Gounder master as a herder. The novel is set in the Sixties before the rise of a powerful Dalit political movement. It depicts the many brutalities that Shortie is subjected to at the hands of his Gounder master, who is just above him in the social hierarchy. The novel sensitively portrays the rich emotional lives of Shortie and his Dalit friends at the same time that it explores Shortie's complex but intimate relationship to his master's son, Selvan. There is a strain of political thought and social analysis, represented by the work of thinker Kancha Iliiah, for example, that advances the notion that social groups immediately above Dalits share more with them than with the high-born Brahminical jatis. *Seasons of the Palm*, rightly shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize in 2005, is a brilliant exploration of this thesis.

I began by noting that caste should not be regarded as the burden of Dalits alone. In this context, it is worth asking whether works like *Seasons of the Palm*, which foregrounds Dalit lives and experiences but is not by a Dalit author, should be included in the notion of a Dalit boom literature. And if *Seasons of the Palm* is admitted to this nascent canon, what of *Untouchable*, the classic novel in English written by Mulk Raj Anand in the 1930s? While they cannot substitute for Dalit perspectives, such works too contribute to a rich exploration of questions of agency in the context of the varna-jati complex. What should their status be in relationship to the present argument?

Critical Approaches to Agency in Dalit Literature

An answer to the question with which I end the previous section can only emerge from a still developing literary criticism on Dalit literature. Even as the literature itself has burgeoned, literary criticism is playing catch-up.

A handful of essays and books have appeared in the languages in which the literature is being written—aside from Marathi and Tamil, especially Kannada and Hindi. Unfortunately, here again little exists in translation, though *Poisoned Bread* does include a short section of criticism. A book-length contribution to criticism is Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, also originally written in Marathi, which derives the terms of its analysis from Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers Manifesto. An attempt at a systematic approach to the interpretation of Dalit literature, Limbale's book as I have suggested in *Flesh and Fish Blood* has the potential to serve as a point of departure for needed debates about the shape and purpose of Dalit literature.

And how should we situate discussions of Dalit literature within a broader critical context? Regarding the present argument as illustration, we may note opportunities to link up with debates within postcolonial studies about the agency of the colonized. In a seminal account of the colonial state in "Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography," Ranajit Guha argues that the colonial state should be characterized as a "dominance without hegemony," that is, as a form of social control that owed inordinately to instruments of coercion and relied less on persuasion and the elicitation of consent from the ruled. He links this characteristic of the colonial state to its origins as the instrument of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. In the final pages of his essay, the thrust of his argument is revealed to be not only an account of the colonial state but also a polemical engagement with an alternative school of historiography. In Guha's opinion, this historiography, despite its declarations to the contrary, remains influenced by a liberal colonialist tradition of British historiography of India. Hence, it is not able to arrive at an accurate understanding of the colonial state as a "dominance without hegemony" but rather misconstrues "colonialism as a hegemonic dominance" (296). In the process, it discounts the resistance of the colonized and instead focuses on the processes by which the consent of the colonized was elicited by the colonial state. The contrast between these two different ways of formulating the colonial state—either as "dominance without hegemony" or as "hegemonic dominance"—reveals contrasting ways of understanding the agency of the colonized. If one approach understands subaltern agency to be expressed mainly through resistance, the other understands such agency mainly as collaboration. For a radical criticism, "resistance" is surely preferable to "collaboration."

What lessons can we draw from this treatment of agency in regards to Dalit literature? The question that Guha poses in reference to the colonial state could be appropriately reformulated. Is the varna-jati complex "dominance without hegemony" or "hegemonic dominance"? Posing this question in this way allows us to do two things at the same time: (1) raise the question of agency with regard to the varna-jati complex in a theoretically rich fashion; and (2) cross-hatch this exploration with insights from postcolonial theory, not only to enrich our understandings of the varna-jati complex

but also to disturb the typical protocols of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory has not adequately engaged the varna-jati complex. The questions it has posed about colonialism and its aftermath have not been sufficiently extended to explorations of "caste." There are opportunities here to open up a two-way dialogue. We might ask for example how "dominance without hegemony" and "hegemonic dominance" are refracted by the varna-jati complex; for, surely, colonial power in whatever form was not uniformly applied across the uneven social terrain of colonial India.

Between "dominance without hegemony" and "hegemonic dominance" are myriad gradations. It now becomes possible for us to see literary texts as affective and affecting explorations of these gradations. Thus, Surve's brilliant poem might be seen to expose the articulation of dominance and hegemony across the divides of nature as well as public and private spaces. Nature itself is "caste-ized," so to speak, as are public and private spaces. This would seem to be a complete dominance (dominance without hegemony); except that the poet also remarks, "I said the things I was assigned to say," suggesting a hegemonic elicitation of consent; and then follows this up with a spitting act of resistance at the end. The poem thus becomes legible as an exquisite exploration of the calibration of power between dominant forms and hegemonic forms in the interstices of which resistant agency (spitting) appears. In parallel with the questions that Guha raises about colonized society, we are led to ask whether caste-ized society is not an ever-evolving dance amongst dominance, hegemony and resistance in the context of the varna-jati complex.

If I have offered a way of engaging Dalit literature here, it is not with the notion that Dalit works are singular and easily characterized by recourse to one or two tenets. The problem of agency is not unique to Dalit works, as indeed my reference to Guha's essay is meant to affirm. The myriad arrangements of the *varna-jati complex*—better captured indeed by this phrase rather than the ubiquitous *caste*—elicit myriad responses. These responses find expression within the structures of the varna-jati complex and so might be seen to have some unity to them (a concern with specific forms of social oppression associated with notions of pollution, for example), but that is a unity within a dizzying diversity. In this context, the interlocutors of Dalit literature are multiple—Dalits themselves as well as non-Dalits of many kinds. The address of the poem by Surve is not the same as that of Viramma's testimonio. Some Dalit works speak truth to power, some spit at it, and others still ignore the powerful to speak truth to the powerless. The larger context here certainly is the postcolonial nationalist project—the project of building the post-1947 Indian nation-state. Dalit responses to this overarching social context are, not surprisingly, manifold—the response of an Ambedkar is not the same as that of a Chandra Bhan Prasad and his is not the same as that of a Telugu poet like Gadar.³ While Dalit literature certainly emerges within this larger socio-political context, it would be outside the scope of this essay to parse further these responses (when there

is a considered response, for not all Dalit works target the nation-state explicitly).

To conclude, I am suggesting by way of references to well-established areas of research within postcolonial studies a useful *preliminary* area of inquiry—the question of agency—in the field of Dalit literature. The appropriateness of this preliminary commitment—preliminary in the context of an emerging critical enterprise—is argued, I would aver, by the very prominence of autobiographical genres in Dalit literature, whether in prose or verse. Autobiographical genres suggest the important role Dalit writers play as agents as well as witnesses to agency. Like African American slave narratives and autobiographies, Dalit life narratives explore and indict an atrocious system of social organization. At the same time, Dalit literature is more than simply life narratives. And it is more than weary sociology. Alongside rage, there is wonder and humor in Dalit literature, and also aesthetic experimentation. Dalit literature has righteous anger, and it has invigorating hope. In it are broken lives, and also repaired and fulfilled ones. As befits a growing literary tradition of significance, Dalit literature has rich variety, and that is part of what makes it an exciting contemporary cultural phenomenon. Tracking the vicissitudes of agency in some of the ways suggested here is one—and it is only one—avenue of entry into a profoundly challenging but also rewarding area of research.

Notes

¹ See Oliver C. Cox for an early comparison of caste in India and race in the United States.

² The constitution of India of course outlaws caste discrimination. Progressive constitutional aspiration has been met at least partially: K. R. Narayanan, recent President of India, was a Dalit. Mayawati, the recent powerful Chief Minister of India's most populous state, is also a Dalit. It would be naïve however to conclude from this that modern India represents a simple progression to greater and greater freedoms for Dalits.

³ Of Ambedkar I have written above. The pro-business and modernist Chandra Bhan Prasad and the Naxalite and folk Gadar might be said to represent two contemporary poles in Dalit responses to the Indian nation-state.

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Double Speaking Splinters of Truth: Towards a Feminist Poetics of Imperfection

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What truths may be spoken and how from the political location of postmodernist postcolonial feminism to the displacing powers of today? This paper considers the legacies of Grace Paley and Edward Said: their devotion to approximating rather than representing the truth and never dominating it. It emphasizes the importance of the conjugation between ethics, politics and poetics and proposes the feminist figuration of *la dividua*, a sexed, culturally creolized, relational subjectivity. It thus aims at pursuing the articulation rather than the dissolution of double binds, the production of non-totalizing knowledges, and the expression of the potential agency for change by speaking, poetically and translationally, splinters of truth to the pluralized and assimilating powers of globalization. Relying on Gayatri Spivak's insistence on aesthetic education and her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, the paper foregrounds the void and silence rather than the systematic mastering of language, thus allowing discourse to be performed intimately and free from pre-figured meanings. Drawing from Eve K. Sedgwick, Audre Lorde, and Karen Barad, it claims that the ontological meaning of *la dividua* resides in her irreducible material binding of the other with the self, and in her need for poetry as the possibility to speak two languages simultaneously. Yet, her speaking is an act of resistance capable of pursuing a "tidalectics" (Kamau Brathwaite) that allows differences to stand beside one another and share the common good. Joan Anim-Addo's personal telling of Caribbean history is offered as exemplary. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan's description of the concept of *dharma* and Leela Gandhi's elaboration of an ethics of imperfectionism and use of ordinary language suggest that askesis as self-ruination pertains to *la dividua* and to her practice of cultural translation as political action. Nikki Giovanni's poetry is considered an exemplary instance of speaking truthfully on the edge between the will to power and the will to truth by engaging corporeal vulnerability and linguistic performativity, as finely argued by Judith Butler. In conclusion, Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* is read as exemplary of *la dividua*'s poetics of imperfection for its radical deconstruction of the mystique of the romantic happy family and of kinship as patriarchal bloodline performed on the uncertain territory of cultural translation. **Keywords:** postmodernist postcolonial feminism, poetics of creolization, ethics of imperfectionism, translation.