



## Dalit Short Story and the Search for Identity

### KEYWORDS

Dalit, Short Story, Dalit Identity, Untouchability

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**ABSTRACT** *Dalit short story is the favourite literary form of Dalit writers. Dalit short story appeared as a corollary of the 'jehad' against the social varna system and massacres. Dalit short stories have attempted to establish social values and bring to light certain hidden aspects. Dalit short stories are expressive of the anger and revolt against injustice in an admirably subtle manner. Writers of Dalit short stories may be divided into two groups – one consisting of born Dalits and the other comprising writers who are non-Dalits. Many short stories by the non-Dalit writers have failed for want of balance between the content and the reality, and some have proved ineffective for mere documentation of facts, while writers who are born Dalits have themselves undergone the pains and agonies of Dalits either directly or indirectly, and hence they have an edge over the others.*

Dalit short story is the favourite literary form of Dalit writers. Many Marathi and Gujarati Dalit writers have given the artistically excellent short stories. Dalit short stories are indeed appealing, in terms of themes and narrative techniques. Dalit short story appeared as a corollary of the 'jehad' against the social varna system and massacres. Any work produced by the Dalit writer cannot be called Dalit fiction. A work to be called Dalit fiction, it is not sufficient that it be written by a Dalit writer. The subject matter of writing and the consciousness underlying it are of the utmost importance. Only that work written by Dalit writers can be called Dalit literature, which concerns Dalits, which is inspired by the Dalit movement. It must contain Ambedkar's thought, the thought that teaches Dalit the feeling of self-respect, and the language of rights and entitlements. While talking about the importance of Dalit short story Dr. Mohan Parmar opines:

We need to approach the genres of the short story and the novel if we wish to bring about a social revolution or abolish rigid customs. It is more so the novel which provides ample scope for the establishment of the values of human life. The short story on the other hand is more effective as far as subtlety of expression is concerned. (Parmar: 179)

As such, Dalit short stories have attempted to establish social values and bring to light certain hidden aspects. The expression of the customs, the way of life as well the hopes and aspirations of the Dalit community give shape to a different world altogether. Notwithstanding, Dalit short stories are expressive of the anger and revolt against injustice in an admirably subtle manner. The last three decades have witnessed the success of Marathi and Gujarati Dalit short stories; the cause can be attributed to the movement of the short story from the traditional mould to novel experimentation. The Dalit writer today is fully occupied in trying to examine the various possibilities of presenting short stories in an innovative manner, by accepting the importance of the event and the character rather than obscuring the event; such efforts have achieved fruition as can be seen today.

Writers of Dalit short stories may be divided into two

groups – one consisting of born Dalits and the other comprising writers who are non-Dalits. The many short stories by the non-Dalit writers have failed for want of balance between the content and the reality, and some have proved ineffective for mere documentation of facts, while writers who are born Dalits have themselves undergone the pains and agonies of Dalits either directly or indirectly, and hence they have an edge over the others. The dominant themes in Marathi and Gujarati Dalit short stories are the quest for identity, untouchability and related events. Protest against injustice, exploitation of Dalits by savarnas, untouchability, social discrimination, the struggle to make two ends meet are all inevitable facets of Dalit short stories. However, it is the Dalit awakening which is the guiding force. It would not be an exaggeration to say that most Dalit short stories are sites of anger and protest conveyed through a specific locale and language. A central incident of atrocity inflicted upon a powerless Dalit by the savarna, the rural locale of a 'vas' or 'basti' (separate quarters for untouchables) and dialects stand as hallmarks of a good, authentic Dalit short story.

One needs at this juncture to be acquainted with the definition of the Dalit short story form. Though Dalit short stories are part of Indian literature, there are some characteristics which make them different from main stream Indian literature. Prominent Dalit writer Dr. Mohan Parmar pinpoints the characteristics which are peculiar to Dalit short stories alone in his research article as under:

Dalit existence and way of life.

Expression of basic problems of Dalits in context of the thematic content.

Speech-behaviour patterns and customs as well as traditions of Dalits through characterization.

Dalit sensibility and contextual meaning of the entire work. (Parmar: 184)

Dalit short stories are expressive of the plight of the down-trodden. It is therefore natural that a writer from a Dalit background will recreate his experiences in his works. The

customs, traditions, way of life, native language, and the life in vas are depicted in a novel manner. The Dalit writer depicts the bare reality stripped of all its deceits; he does not believe in building castles in the air, his feet are firmly planted on the ground and rooted in actuality. His description therefore provides a vivid contrast to mainstream short story.

There is a fundamental difference between main stream short stories and Dalit short stories. Dalit short stories; their definitions are different. The sentiments of the Dalit community, the feelings, the social, economic, political and cultural problems of the Dalits occupy centre stage in Marathi and Gujarati Dalit short stories. The mission of Dalit short stories is to sweep society clean of cobwebs, mobilize social change and adopt new values. Dalit literature has been able to effect an historic turn by bidding farewell to superstition used freely in traditional literature, revolting against rigidity, casteism and inequality, striving for the welfare of the common man and society which is casteless and classless, casting aside all that is decadent and worn out and by adopting a scientific attitude. These converge to form the definition of Dalit literature in the present context.

Gujarati and Marathi Dalit short stories have a definite aim whereas the main stream short stories do not. This is why, many a times main stream short stories do not offer anything beyond cheap entertainment. Also, the idiom of Dalit literature is very different; the content is rooted in solid social reality. One finds in Marathi and Gujarati main stream short stories a blind imitation of western literature in the name of experimentation. Marathi and Gujarati Dalit short story writers are forging ahead with originality of theme and uniqueness of techniques; the question of imitation and adaptation therefore does not arise. The native language with its uniquely flavoured words, proverbs, idioms, imagination, imagery, and figures of speech are the strong points of the Dalit short story writer. The Dalit writer reaches out to embrace the native linguistic nuances. No main stream writer can claim to have as much commitment as Dalit writers have. The Dalit writer carries within himself the feeling that he is an individual member of society and that it is his duty to convey some message to society. Marathi and Gujarati Dalit short story writers are preoccupied with annihilating hollow and corrode values and installing new values in their place. The main stream writers are the least concerned so far as the above commitment is in question.

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