



JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

QUEST FOR THE EVOLUTION OF DALIT LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

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Abstract: The present paper will explore the social condition of Dalits in India and Afro-Caribbean people in the Hispanophone Caribbean. We will see how Dalits were and are victims of caste-based discrimination and on the other hand how Afro-Caribbeans faced inhuman practices of slavery and racism. We will also see how these people have described their plight in their respective literature. Afro-Caribbean started their literary movement in the early 20th century, whereas Dalit literary movement started in Marathi literature in 1960s and soon it travelled to other languages. Our argument will also be that Afro-Caribbean writers have not only talked about afro-Caribbean people but have included the concerns of all marginalized people in the Caribbean but Dalit writers have been writing only about their problems which restricts the readership and confines their movement to their community only. Therefore, the evolution of Dalit literature is crucial now.

Keywords: Dalit, Afro-Caribbean, Casteism, Racism, Negrism, Dalit Panther, Language

Dalits in India and afro-Caribbean in Caribbean have suffered the heat of Casteism and Racism in their respective societies.

In 16th century, the African blacks were brought to the Caribbean regions from Africa as slaves by the colonizers for selling them to the plantation owners, made them work in sugarcane fields and small factories in the most inhuman conditions. They were subjected to terrible conditions of slavery and later to unbearable misery. Very similar condition prevailed for the Dalits in our country. Their sufferings are comparable with that of the black slaves brought from Africa; they were not exploited based on race but of caste. They were made to live outside of the limits of the so-called civilized zone, i.e. in the marginalized area of the city or village. Even their touch was (and in some places still) seen to be polluting the ambience and human beings of upper cast.

Cuban nationality begins to be defined in the late eighteenth century, when it met the socio-economic conditions emerged from a slow process of assimilation and acculturation of the people from Europe and Africa who settled on the island.

The Cuban homeland started taking shape with its specific cultural features, and in this phase, the poetry, from its initial manifestations, aspires to be the most refined note of the national spirit.

For some poets poetry is that which has its roots in the reality of its own people who germinate and grow; emerged from the depths of the progressive occurrences of the nation, and is expressed in many different voices and tones of the most diverse tones.

There were three major poets who stand out to be the most representatives; Jose Maria Heredia, José Martí, and Nicolás Guillén. The poetry of Heredia, voice of the patriotic spirit, appears in the glow of Latin American emancipation. Heredia was the inaugural spokesperson of the Cuban Revolution. Since he discovered the native landscape disgraced by slavery and injustice, clamoured earnestly for freedom, and called the people to conquer it, armed with weapon and revenge.

From the fire of this flame emerged the poetry of José Martí in 1886. It was about the people struggling for their independence. Since then, it was not possible to making any distinction between the action, chant, the passionate blood flowing through the veins of the fighters and the blood that was boiling in the verses. Blood dropped during fighting for the independence of his country, is the best of his poetry rubric.

The reconciliation of José Martí to the Afro-Caribbean people was always fraternal, kind, humanist and inevitably revolutionary. In addition, the work of Nicolás Guillén was related to this poetry, which identified the poet and revolution.

In Cuba, some important writers started a new literary movement that dealt with problems of afro-Caribbean people at the end of 1920s. Some notable names are Emilia Ballagas, Ramon Guirao, Jose Manuel Poveda, Nicolás Guillén and Regino Pedrosa.

These poets developed two fundamental tendencies: social tendency that talked about afro-Caribbean people's issues, and folkloric tendencies of musical and sensual nature.

Most common genres of their expression have been blues, ballads, stories, novels, dance and songs that are clearly represented in the works of Nicolás Guillén (as seen in the poetry of afro-American poet Langston Hughes).

There have been many writers who started writing in the colonial period when their works were not being appreciated and were not accepted for publication by the white publishers. This had happened in the case of Nicolás Guillén. He could not get his work published for many years because whites were of the opinion that his poetry was not poetry. It was believed to be uncultured and incomprehensible by one set of people and as anthropological and culture-centric by another set.

Guillén was a mulatto, raised in a middle class family whose parents were of mixed race of African and Spanish heritage. He became a very important poet of marginalized people of not only the Caribbean but of the whole world. In his childhood, he faced racism in his school that he expressed in his literary works. During school time only, he started writing poetry on social problems of his community. This made him the leader of *Negrismo* movement in the Caribbean.

According to some Cuban poets, the homage paid to Nicolás Guillén would be national homage and universal recognition. According to Roberto Marquez:

The great poets are a synthesis of the life of their people and Nicolás Guillén is a real poet of synthesis.

Guillén is a poet whose personal ideology is able to foresee the needs of the unitary national ideology, to prepare the unity of the nation and also of the people, and whose personal ideology responds to the needs of the national ideology.¹

According to some writers, he was the best representative of afro-Cuban Poetry and founder of new Cuban poetry. He was not a simple creator of new poetic form but a poet who knew how to go deep into the Negro problems, as well as those of Cuban society in general; and he had carried them into his poetry. The Cuban, Antillean, American and universal dimension of his poetry appears with the publication of his first books. Guillén started writing poems since (neo) colonial time. In his poems, he dealt with the problems of colored people of Cuba. April 20th, 1930 marked Guillén's first response to the prevailing debate on the *Negro* and the *Negritude* through his verses entitled *Motivos de son* (The Son Motifs)(1930). Cuban *Son* inspired the musicality in these poems as well as these poems explored the real condition of afro-Caribbean people before Cuban revolution.

Language used in his poetry is rhythmic, musical (imitating drum sound) with the help of figurative language, which are symbols, onomatopoeia, alliterations etc. As it is seen in the tradition of African American literature (in case of the poetry of Langston Hughes also) Nicolás Guillén has also used musical words that invite people to dance.

He used the Spanish language of afro-Caribbean and made use of African words in his verses. At times words do not have any meaning, but they are very rhythmic. Use of this language in his poetry gives the real feeling of Africanness in Cuba. For example, the poem *Canto Negro*:

¡Yambambo, yambambe!
Repica el congo solongo,
Repeica el negro bien negro;
Congo solongo del songo
baila yambo sobre un pie.
Mamatamba, serembe cuseremba.
El negro canta y se ajuma
El negro se ajuma y canta,
El negro canta y se va.
Acuememe serembo,
ae;
yambo
ae.
Tamba, tamba, tamba, tamba
Tamba del negro que tumba;
Tumba del negro caramba,
Caramba, que el negro tumba:
¡yamba, yambo, yambambe!²

In *Motives de son*, Guillén aimed at integrating the afro-Caribbean into the Cuban society by including their social, ethnic and cultural elements in his poetry and by becoming their spokesperson in all respect. He not only portrayed them in his writings but also demanded an equal respect for their values and systems, which was seen in the 1930s as an act of social and political protest. In his second book *Songoro Cosongo* (1931), he focused more on the culture of mulatto people in Cuba, and strongly criticized the racism and marginalization of afro-Caribbean people. The focus was the assimilation of afro-Caribbean people with the people of other race in order to end the racial discrimination prepare for the Cuban revolution.

These two books dealt with the problems of colored people like slavery, poverty, racism etc. in Cuba. But his following books were different in comparison with the earlier ones.

Now, Musicality and dance was not so important. He was clear about his poetic technique and political ideology, therefore he raised his voice against imperialist power through poems of *West Indies Ltd*(1934). This way, Guillen expanded the themes of his poetry that

¹ Marquez, Roberto, Alfred Melon and Keith Ellis, 1980, pp.38.

² https://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/escriitores/guillen/poemas/poema_01.htm consulted on 24/11/22

included problems of all the marginalized people of the Caribbean and the world. He enlisted several issues related to Caribbean people in general: poverty, exploitation of labourers, racial discrimination etc...

The poem *West Indies, Ltd.* Gives us the sense of the same.

West Indies Ltd. Coconuts, tobacco and liquor....

These are dark and smiling people,

Conservative and liberal,

Rancher and sugar,

Where sometimes runs a lot of money

But one always lives badly.³

The revolutionary conception of poetry, which Guillen implies in *West Indies Ltd.*, begins to crystallize in his book *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* (1937) (Songs for soldiers and Sons for tourists). This book was an attack on the growing military presence in Cuba, which was funded and supported by the USA. This activity put the lives of common people of Cuba into trouble. However, with these kinds of works Guillén became a poet of synthesis by including different concerns of all the people of the Caribbean and of the whole world. Whereas, on the other hand, Dalit writers are still far from getting this type of recognition outside of their community and within the country.

The term 'Dalit' (brocken/ scattered, oppressed etc...), was first used in 1958 in a conference held in Bombay. A group of Dalit youth, who had read some afro-American writers of Black Panther movement, got inspired by their writings and ideology and started writing Dalit literature to express their feelings of solidarity with them. They formed 'Dalit Panther' in order to develop a literature of marginalized people of India, especially Dalits. The main objective of Dalit literature was the emancipation of Dalits from all kinds of oppression in Indian society. Now, Dalit literature is being written in almost all the languages of India.

This literature, to a great extent, can be defined as a rebellious expression against the age-old caste oppression and humiliation suffered by them. That is why the writings are not only critical but cynical and the tone is bitter and denunciatory. Therefore, the language is different, it is aggressive and crude and many times abusive. In the works of many poets and writers, it is clearly visible, for example in the Hindi poetry of Malkhan Singh, Omprakash Valmiki and Jay Prakash Kardamn, Mohan Das Naimisaray etc... In his poem Malkhan Singh says:

Our suffering starts with your birth

and it will end with your death.

listen Brahman

if you find our body smelling

do one thing

one day

send your wife with mine to clean excreta

and you come with me,

we'll make leather together

then only you will know the real smell of the life.⁴

In this poem crude language is very much vivid, that is why the mainstream literature very often does not accept this type of language as it does not fall within the norm of an acceptable code. Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer says "Dalit writers should objectively examine themselves in the light of following points: very aggressive and crude language is used in the name of Dalit literature to write short stories on social injustices or atrocities. This is more so in the case of poetry"⁵. The peculiarity of their style of writing itself conditions their readership.

On the other hand, many times it is seen that Dalit literature also repeat the same topic of experience of untouchability etc.. which needs to be changed now. A renowned Dalit writer Sharan Kumar Limbale says: "Dalit writers do not think about the injustices talking place today; they still write about the past"⁶.

In a poem, Hindi dalit poet Om Prakash Valmiki says:

If they

throw you out of your village

You are not allowed to take water

Your are treated badly.

In the sunny day

you are asked to break stone

and in return you get leftover to eat

What would you do then?⁷

It is true that Dalit writers and poets are still depicting the concerns of the past, like untouchability, inequality, and no efforts are made to find the solution of these problems in their writings. Hindi Dalit poetry started with the poetry of Dalit poets Hira Dom

³ https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/west-indies-ltd-1934--0/html/ff47fecc-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_2.html#I_0 consulted on 24/11/22

⁴ Kanwal Bharti, 2006, p. 48.

⁵ Arjun Dangle, 1992, p. 256.

⁶ Sharankumar Limbale, 2004, p.155.

⁷ Kanwal Bharti, 2006, pp. 60-61.

and Achhutanand in early 20th century. They talked about the theme of oppression, untouchability in similar language and genre. Today many are still going on writing about the same experiences of the past using the same disrespectful language.

By definition the tool and medium used by writers and poets -- Afro Cuban or Dalit—is language, whether oral or written. And language mediates between reality and its reflection in literature. Dalit literary traditions now demand for sustenance and recognition, a large and understanding reading which will share the basic concern with the figurative and crude nature of these writings. Dalit Literature is mostly written in the vernacular languages of India, which in itself restricts the readership.

So, to conclusion, it can be said that Nicolás Guillén, who suffered the heat of racism since childhood, depicted it in his poetry, and later on, as per the situations that he faced and with the passage of time when he gained some recognition and more experience, he wrote poems of different concerns. Now the central issues of his writings revolved as much around the problems of blacks, as around that of whites who were also being exploited by the pre imperialist ruling classes of the region, therefore such issues as daily struggle for one or two meals, health, poverty, and in general living life with some dignity of the West Indians, problems of military dictatorship, racism etc. became the subject matter of his poems, which in turn made him a popular poet amongst not only the people of his country but in the entire Hispano-America and Caribbean. His writings also had great resonance in Spain and in other European countries. But Dalit writers and poets who wrote and many still writing in vernacular languages which is not accepted by the mainstream literature probably because the language used in it is disrespectful and the theme is same as it was seen at the beginning of Dalit writings. Therefore, one must think about the evolution of Dalit literature now and include the concerns of all dispossessed people.

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