Sundara Ramaswamy’s “About Dalit Literature”: Text and Context

V. Bharathi Harishankar
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TEXT AND CONTEXT

The term ‘Dalit’ meaning oppressed or broken, Dalit studies is a growing body of works foregrounding the experience of the caste-based oppression rife in Indian society even today. That it has catalysed a large intellectual group is evident in the increasing number of creative texts, critical debates and courses/programs offered in colleges and universities. The present study attempts to situate a critical intervention by a non-Dalit Tamil writer, Sundara Ramaswamy, on Dalit literature. After tracing the origin and growth of Dalit writing, especially in Tamil, I present my English translation of the previously untranslated Tamil essay, “About Dalit Literature” (1992). The concluding section of this study highlights the forward-looking ideas foregrounded in the text by comparing them with the views expressed by the Marathi Dalit writer and critic, Sharankumar Limbale, in his recent text Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations (2004).

Origin and Growth of Dalit Writing

Even though Dalit writing has been traced back to the 11th-12th centuries, its modern impetus has come from thinkers such as Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. In the modern context, Dalit writing grew out of a movement called Little Magazine started by educated youth, modelled on the Black Panther movement and Black writing in the US. The unique contribution of Dalit literature is its interrogation of Brahmanic hegemony, consciousness-raising among Dalits, and crystallising of an intellectual platform (Kishore). The Dalit literary movement started in Marathi and has now travelled to other languages such as Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi and Punjabi (Duggal). In comparison to writings in other languages, contemporary Dalit writing in Tamil is of recent origin even though the first reference dates back to the 13th century legend of Nandanar. In her article, “A Brief Introduction to Dalit Literature,” Meena Kandasamy dates the emergence of contemporary Tamil Dalit literature to the birth centenary celebrations of Dr. Ambedkar (Kandasamy). However, it has accelerated so much over the last two decades that it now has a rich corpus of works, written in a wide variety of styles by writers such as Poomani, Daniel, Sivakami, Edayavendan, Unjai Rajan Abimani, Bama, Anbadavan, Gunasekaram, Cho. Darman, Sukhirtharani and Imaiyam. Thus, the range offered by Dalit writing in Tamil encompasses articulation of identity, experiential reality, self-reflexivity, self-articulation, caste-gender nexus and socio-political intervention (Mangalam).

The quick pace of development in Tamil Dalit writing has not been matched by critical and theoretical output. As Anushiya Sivanarayanan remarks, “Dalit literature is an entirely new genre within Tamil literature, and Tamil scholars—many of them non-Dalit—find themselves scrambling trying to find a new poetics for this emergent literature.” (59) In Alok Mukherjee’s opinion, this is a common trend in Dalit writings because most Dalit writing has been in the various regional languages, while much of the theorizing in India and abroad has been in English”(vii). Due to this linguistic lacuna, certain pertinent questions have not been raised and answered. In the case of Tamil Dalit writing, critical interrogations—of the impact of Dalit writing on Tamil literature produced across the globe, exploration of spaces between Dalit and non-Dalit experiences, construction and collapse of stereotypes, and the shift from protest through self-critique to transformation—have not been articulated extensively.
Literary criticism on Dalit literature in Tamil has largely been confined to issues pertaining to Dalit identity, self-articulation, Dalit aesthetic paradigms and re-readings of literary classics. The debate regarding who is a Dalit writer refuses to die down although it continues to remain a fruitless one. A Dalit by birth does not necessarily write progressive, liberationist literature (Mangalam).

Critics like Aniket Jaaware, Sharankumar Limbale, and in Tamil, Raj Gauthaman and a whole host of academic scholars have certainly focussed attention on the ideological and aesthetic perspectives of Dalit writing. However, the corpus of writing on Dalit poetics is still very meagre.

It is in this context that Sundara Ramaswamy’s essay “Dalit Ilakkiyam Pattri” in the collection Kattril Kalantha Perosai (1998) assumes importance. The essay clearly articulates the limitations of non-Dalit representations, the need to find authentic Dalit voices, and the need to move beyond ideological resistances to aesthetically sound representations.

**Sundara Ramaswamy: An Introduction**

Sundara Ramaswamy, popularly known as Su.Ra, (1931-2005) is a major contemporary writer in Tamil. His contributions to Tamil literature are multifarious. He began his career by writing poetry and by translating some Malayalam novels of well-known writer, Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai, into Tamil. His short stories bear a strong resemblance to the pioneering works of Puthumaipithan. His novel, Oru Puliamarathin Kathai, expanded the horizons of the Tamil novel in terms of form and content. Written back in 1966, it weaves a fascinating mix of modernist and postmodern elements. His acumen as a noted Tamil literary critic is amply evident in his contributions to the magazine, Kalachuvadu, of which he was the founder-Editor.

Su.Ra’s works reveal an acute awareness of the potential of the literary form combined with a clear expression. His narratives combine the social context with a nuanced delineation of the plight of the individual. The evolution of Su.Ra’s writings traverse three stages. The first stage is marked by a distinct Communist slant and a strong criticism of society. The second stage transcends narrow ideological concerns to represent life and experiences through the realist mode. The third stage focusses on the overarching framework that clarifies the concerns of the first two stages. Works of this period are metaphysical in this respect.

“Dalit Ilakkiyam Pattri” belongs to the later stage of Su.Ra’s literary career. He was already a well-established editor and writer. He had nurtured both Dalit and non-Dalit creative writers. This personal concern was also reflected in his constant interrogation of signifiers such as Dalit, mainstream, etc. From this standpoint, he wrote this essay to crystallise his thoughts on the present and future of Dalit literature.

The section below presents my translation of Su. Ra’s essay, and it is subsequently followed by my own contextual comments.

**“About Dalit Literature”: A Translation**

I have no clear understanding of the term “Dalit Literature.” In Tamil, there are no clearly definable Dalit works, say, a Dalit novel. Any literary creation is language dependent but speaks beyond the confines of language. Therefore, I have had little opportunity for a memorable experience of Dalit literature. I have had the chance to read some English
translations of the so-called Dalit works. They were strong in ideological wrath and weak in aesthetics. Any artistic creation is capable of clarifying several issues in an instant. For want of new topics, those who view life only through the political lens may keep discussing Dalit literature without considering its aesthetic aspects. No Dalit writer will abjectly accept such empty words.

There is no guarantee that profound experiences will result in masterpieces. However, the depths in a work reveal strong experiences, which shaped them. With experiential depth, imagination enables an understanding of the essence. If this experiential depth is absent, then the imagination becomes useless and flounders at a superficial level.

Writers from different backgrounds have written about the bourgeoisie. Just as it is natural for an artist to operate close to his background, transcending his background has also remained a natural challenge for a writer. An artist achieves success by transcending his caste, religion, personal background, nation and language. What I call success is the ability to transform individual experience into universal experience. Going by the examples presented by literary history, I do not think it is possible for a bourgeois writer to foreground the lives of the oppressed people.

In Hindu society, inequalities have been crystallized. In an unequal situation, the fate intertwined in life seems to be the only equality. A great dark partition has been raised between the assumed inequalities of the elite and the existing (real) inequalities of the oppressed. This is the gloom cast by caste. On either side of this area of darkness, two completely different life styles have emerged. On the one side, are people who have created civilization through hard work. On the other, are people who have built their lives on the hard labour of the first group. They have exploited the labour to increase their own oppressive power. That these oppressions have insulted the proletariat culture is like the flame subsuming the oil. The brightness of the flame depends on the strength of the oil. I do not think it is possible for an elitist writer to transcend the casteist bias and talk about the oppressed people. Some may try to reap benefits by foregrounding the oppressed. This is no different from the oppression of the Dalits through disregard. Great literature cannot result from high-sounding speech.

The time is ripe for Dalits to foreground themselves in their own idiom. Till this day, our understanding of Dalits has been influenced by elitist representations of them. When Dalits attempt to talk about themselves, these foundations may collapse and reveal the absurdities of the elitist imagination. The oppressed class is not only distinct but totally unlike the other. It is not necessary that Dalit laws, morals, estimates and cultures should conform to elitist parameters. Elite intellectuals no longer have the right to believe that liberation of the oppressed is defined by the success in making them follow the cultural norms of the oppressor.

Social categories are useful to understand social differences. A work of art reflects the distinctions based on caste, religion and culture. It foregrounds the differences. It registers the evils of oppression. Very big passions may form the kernel of Dalit literature. That is but natural. However, a Dalit writer has to create his art. He has to transcend his soliloquy with himself and his dialogue with the immediate community in order to communicate with humanity at large. Only then is he an artist. His personal grief, the sorrows of his caste, the agonies of his religion, the tragedies of oppression—in all their varying backgrounds and forms have to converge in the Pond of Human Despair. They have to reflect the unified aes-
thetic beauty found in the different tragedies. These are the rules of creation. If he creates by imagining life instead of understanding it, his fantasies will surely fade in time.

In order to understand life, we need magnum opus that would subsume an entire life in its range. So far, the life we have understood is the life of the privileged class. The time is ripe to inscribe the large chunk of life that has been omitted. The perspectives on life put forward by these works will broaden our vision and force us to re-assess our premises.

When writers emerge from the Dalit community and when their art achieves success, then the signifier “Dalit Art” will disappear and their works will join the group of masterpieces and transcend time. Works of the hour will be weak and will reflect Dalit life only from a political perspective. These will be mechanical representations mired in propaganda. These works will be subsumed in oratory and rhetoric and cannot stand the test of time. An artist can never escape the dictum that art is a quest for the essence of life.

Contextualising the Translated Text

Sundara Ramaswamy’s essay foregrounds two basic premises. One, is the insistence that the uniqueness of the Dalit experience can be expressed effectively only by Dalit writers. Second, is the equal insistence on the need for Dalit writers to move beyond the propagandist mode. In a telephonic conversation with me, the author’s son (Mr. Kannan) recalled how his father was a vehement critic of both the non-Dalit representations of Dalits and the propaganda dominated writings of Dalit writers. This critical approach explains Su.Ra’s description of the works by well known writers, Bama and Sivakami, as important texts strong on the personal story but weak in establishing a Dalit aesthetics or poetics. It also explains his open support of Imayam’s writings as creating a sound base for Dalit aesthetics.

The most interesting aspect of the essay, in my opinion, is its close resemblance to the views articulated by recent Dalit critics. In particular, Limbale’s text Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, translated by Alok Mukherjee and published in 2004, contains close echoes of Su.Ra’s arguments. The opening statements of the essay—“I have no clear understanding of the term ‘Dalit Literature.’ In Tamil, there are no clearly definable Dalit works, say, a Dalit novel”—direct our attention to the question of authentic representation. Quite obviously, Su.Ra is not including the works of non-Dalit representations of the Dalit. This resembles Limbale’s definition of Dalit literature as “writing about Dalits, by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness.” (Limbale 19) In the second paragraph of the essay, Sundara Ramasamy uses the phrase “experiential depth” to describe the essential quality of Dalit literature. Limbale seems to expand this view when he states that “the connection of experience with the lives of Dalits cannot be ignored. Experience, here, is the product prepared from a chemical process, with pain and revolt as the ingredients.” (Limbale 32) It is this experience that determines the authenticity of a Dalit work.

Sundara Ramasamy draws our attention to the “great dark partition” raised by caste, which defines the differences in perception and articulation by Dalits and the upper caste writers. Expanding this idea further, Su.Ra remarks that it is impossible “for an elite writer to transcend the casteist bias and talk about the oppressed people.” Pursuing the same idea, Limbale states

1. I am grateful to Mr. Kannan, Editor of Kalachuvadu, for granting me permission to translate and publish this text and for sharing some contextual information regarding the essay. My thanks to Mr. Dilip Kumar for introducing me to Mr. Kannan.
The view of life conveyed in Dalit literature is different from the world of experience expressed hitherto. A new world, a new society and a new human being have been revealed in literature for the first time (Limbale 33).

The new perspective on creative articulation also raises questions on who is authorised to delineate the Dalit life experience.

In Su.Ra’s view, authenticity can be achieved only when “Dalits attempt to talk about themselves.” However, this talk has to clearly move beyond mere rhetoric. As Limbale states, “It is necessary for [Dalit writers] to know the boundary between the activist and the artist.” (33). This responsible delineation is what will distinguish authentic Dalit writing from the so-called sympathetic creations by non-Dalits.

Enumerating the qualities of the authentic Dalit works, Su.Ra comments that “Dalit laws, morals, estimates and cultures” can no longer be defined by the elite intellectuals. Echoing this idea, Limbale states that Dalit literature has contributed “fresh experiences, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision” (37), and that “a middle class criticism cannot properly evaluate this literature.” (103) This is because the “universal criteria ... in India carry the markers of caste and class.” (Mukherjee, Introduction viii).

While the authenticity of the Dalit voice is to be maintained and respected, Su.Ra underlines the need for a Dalit writer to “transcend his soliloquy with himself and his dialogue with the immediate community in order to communicate with humanity at large… to reflect the unified aesthetic beauty.” In his interview with Alok Mukherjee, Limbale outlines this transformational role of the Dalit writer as follows:

Any ordinary person can produce the kind of writing that has been done concerning past history… It is not as if there is a great deal of talent in this kind of writing, or that this is great literature… But literature requires vision. And the vision should be such that it takes the common masses forward… (133)

Su.Ra believes that the acme of Dalit writing will be achieved only when the signifier “Dalit Art” disappears and “their works join the group of masterpieces and transcend time.” Limbale lists the following as standards of Dalit literature.

- Artists must be motivated by their experiences.
- Artists must socialize their experiences.
- Artists’ experiences must have the strength to cross provincial boundaries.
- Artists’ experiences must seem relevant to all time. (120)

Limbale’s list provides a route map to achieve Su.Ra’s belief that “art is a quest for the essence of life.”

A Template

My purpose in juxtaposing the texts of SuRa and Limbale is two fold. One is to articulate the recurrent debates and discussions in Dalit studies regarding the authenticity of Dalit representations and the unique qualities of Dalit literature. Second, is to project the empathy with which Su.Ra has delineated the cause of Dalit literature.

An interesting aspect of the translated text is its forecasts on the development of Dalit writing, which is fast turning real in contemporary Dalit literature. Though this text was written in 1992, when debates were raging on the identity of Dalits and authenticity of
representations of Dalits, Su.Ra’s vision transcends an evanescent fervour and provides a template for creating a sound premise for Dalit poetics. That a non-Dalit writer had arrived at this understanding is what makes this essay relevant even today. It also reiterates Limba-le’s statement to Alok Mukherjee that “Dalits have created Dalit literature ... but it is the progressive savarnas who have promoted it.” (Mukherjee, “Reading” 131)

V. Bharathi HARISHANKAR
University of Madras, India

Works Cited

——. “Interview with Sharankumar Limbale.” See Limbale 131-133.