

Exploring Dalit Writer's perspective: A Comparative Analysis of Key aspects of Phule's Gulamgiri and Dutt's Coming Out as Dalit

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Abstract

The post-colonial Indian English prose writing mainly focused on partition, orientalism, diasporic writing, social reform and Dalit literature; 'the untouchables' as they were identified during those days. Majority of the Dalit writers and their works represented slavery, caste system, education for this community and social inequality during the post-independence phase. The contemporary writers are brave enough to raise their voice against anything they feel wrong. The writing style has changed yet the key aspects and features of the 1960s or 80s somehow remain similar in present-day Dalit literature. This paper addresses the argument of the central theme of old and new Dalit literature remaining similar. The question is debated with the analysis of Jyotirao Phule's "Gulamgiri" originally written in Marathi and later translated in English as "Slavery" and contemporary writer Yashika Dutt's "Coming out as Dalit". Paper discusses various aspects like social inequality, education for downtrodden and the discrimination remaining the most discussed features of Dalit writing.

Key Words: Comparative Analysis, Dalit Writer, Gulamgiri, Coming Out as Dalit

1.0 Introduction

Dalit literature is a vibrant and influential genre within Indian literary discourse, serving as a powerful medium for expressing the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit communities historically marginalized by the caste system. This research undertakes a comparative analysis of two significant works in Dalit literature: Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*. This study aims to explore the key aspects of Dalit perspectives as articulated by these prominent Dalit writers, who represent different eras and socio-political contexts. According to K. Kavitha, Lord Gautama Buddha is recognized as the first Dalit reformer, advocating for the abolition of untouchability. During the Middle Ages, Dalits were actively involved in the Bhakti movements, which marked one of the oldest documented reformations in Hinduism. The 19th century saw significant support for the emancipation of Dalits from movements such as the Ramakrishna Mission, Arya Samaj, and Brahmo Samaj. Moreover, the Mahanubhava, Varkari sect, and Saint Kabir rejected the notion of untouchability and embraced Dalits as equals. Maharashtra played a pivotal role in the Dalit reform movement, leading the shift from untouchable to touchable status (Kavitha, 2022).

Exploring the perspectives of Dalit writers is crucial for understanding the multifaceted dimensions of Indian literature and society. Dalit literature, rooted in the experiences of Dalits who have faced social, economic, and political marginalization due to the caste system, provides profound insights into themes of identity, oppression, resistance, and resilience. This research aims to delve into the diverse perspectives and thematic richness found in the works of Dalit writers, highlighting their unique narratives, struggles, and contributions to India's literary landscape. Comparing Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* is historically significant and relevant for their contributions to Dalit literature, social reform, and the ongoing discourse on caste, identity, and empowerment.

1.1 Historical Significance

Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1885): Jyotirao Phule, a prominent social reformer during the colonial era, wrote *Gulamgiri* as a powerful critique of the oppressive caste system and the dominance of Brahminical authority in Indian society. The text challenged the prevailing notions of caste-based superiority and inferiority, advocating for the rights and dignity of Dalits and other marginalized communities. *Gulamgiri* marked a significant milestone in Dalit literature, laying the foundation for future Dalit writers and activists to assert their voices and demand social justice (Rao, 2009).

Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019): Yashika Dutt's memoir provides a contemporary perspective on Dalit identity and activism. In post-independence India, Dutt's work reflects the complexities of navigating Dalit

identity in urban settings, addressing issues of discrimination, privilege, and self-acceptance. *Coming Out as Dalit* adds a personal and introspective dimension to Dalit literature, highlighting the ongoing struggles and triumphs of Dalit individuals in modern society (Subramanian, 2019).

Comparing *Gulamgiri* and *Coming Out as Dalit* facilitates an inter-generational dialogue within Dalit literature. It allows for a nuanced exploration of how Dalit perspectives, narratives, and strategies for resistance have evolved over time, spanning different socio-political contexts. Despite the temporal gap between the two works, they share thematic continuity in addressing issues of caste-based discrimination, identity assertion, social exclusion, and the quest for dignity and equality. By comparing these key aspects, scholars and readers gain deeper insights into the enduring struggles and aspirations of Dalit communities across generations. Phule's polemical approach in *Gulamgiri* contrasts with Dutt's autobiographical narrative in *Coming Out as Dalit*. The comparison sheds light on different narrative strategies employed by Dalit writers to engage with readers, challenge dominant narratives, and foster empathy and understanding. The comparative analysis of Phule's and Dutt's works is highly relevant in contemporary India, where discussions on caste, social justice, and inclusivity remain pivotal. It prompts critical reflections on the legacy of Dalit resistance, the complexities of Dalit identity formation, and the ongoing struggles for substantive equality and representation. The historical significance and relevance of comparing Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* lie in their contributions to Dalit literature, social consciousness, and the ongoing quest for a more inclusive and equitable society. Through this comparison, scholars, activists, and readers can engage in meaningful dialogues about the past, present, and future of Dalit experiences and aspirations.

2.1 Literature Review

Dalit literature, also known as Dalit Sahitya, refers to the body of work produced by members of the Dalit community in India. Historically, Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables," have faced severe social, economic, and political discrimination. Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful tool for asserting Dalit identities, voicing their experiences, and challenging caste-based oppression. This literature spans various genres such as novels, poetry, autobiographies, essays, and plays. In this literature review, the focus will be on key themes, prominent writers, and critical perspectives within Dalit literature, particularly emphasizing the contributions of Jyotirao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. One central theme in Dalit literature is the depiction of caste-based discrimination, violence, and oppression faced by Dalits in Indian society. Writers explore the dehumanizing effects of the caste system on individuals and communities, often portraying the struggle for self-identity and self-respect among Dalits. This literature highlights the journey of Dalit individuals reclaiming their dignity and challenging societal norms that marginalize them (Rao, 2009).

2.1.1 Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890)

Known as the father of the Dalit movement, Jyotirao Phule was a social reformer, thinker, and writer. His influential works include *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), *Shetkarayacha Asud* (The Cultivator's Whipcord), and *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (Book of Universal Truth and Virtue). Phule's writings critiqued Brahminical hegemony, advocated for the rights of marginalized communities, and promoted education as a means of social transformation.

2.1.2 B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956)

A towering figure in Dalit literature and the architect of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar was a prolific writer whose works continue to inspire generations. His seminal works include *Annihilation of Caste*, *The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution*, and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Ambedkar's writings address caste discrimination, social inequality, and the quest for human rights and dignity (Zelliot, 2013).

2.1.3 Mahashweta Devi (1926-2016)

Although not a Dalit herself, Mahashweta Devi's literary contributions to the depiction of Dalit experiences are noteworthy. Her works such as *Mother of 1084* and *Breast Stories* explore caste-based violence, oppression, and the resilience of marginalized communities.

2.1.4 Omprakash Valmiki (1950-2013)

Valmiki, a prominent Dalit writer, is known for his autobiographical work *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. This book vividly portrays the harsh realities of caste discrimination and the struggle for dignity from a personal perspective.

Scholarly discourse on Jyotirao Phule and his works has highlighted his pioneering role in challenging Brahminical orthodoxy and advocating for social justice. Critics often analyze Phule's writings in the context of anti-caste movements, examining his critiques of religious texts, caste-based hierarchy, and the need for social reform (Omvedt, 2004). Similarly, the literary contributions of Babasaheb Ambedkar are subject to extensive

critical analysis. Scholars explore themes of caste annihilation, constitutionalism, and Ambedkar's vision of an inclusive society. His writings on the annihilation of caste continue to generate scholarly debates on caste politics, identity politics, and social transformation in contemporary India (Teltumbde, 2020).

The intersectionality of gender and caste in Dalit literature has been a focal point of critical inquiry. Scholars like Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliott, and Anand Teltumbde have significantly contributed to understanding Dalit feminism, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Dalit women and their literary expressions of resistance and empowerment (Omvedt, 2004; Zelliott, 2013; Teltumbde, 2020). Dalit literature encompasses a rich tapestry of themes, voices, and perspectives that challenge conventional narratives and advocate for social change. Writers like Jyotirao Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and others have left an indelible mark on Indian literature and continue to inspire generations with their vision of a more just and equitable society.

3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

3.1.1 Postcolonialism

Postcolonial theory examines power dynamics, cultural hegemony, and resistance within colonial and postcolonial societies. In the context of Dalit literature, postcolonialism helps to analyze how caste oppression parallels and intersects with colonial structures of domination. Dalit writers critique Brahminical hegemony as a form of internal colonialism, drawing parallels between casteism and colonialism. Dalit literature subverts dominant narratives and reclaims agency by challenging oppressive social structures and cultural norms (Nayar, 2011).

3.1.2 Feminism

Feminist literary theory focuses on gender dynamics, patriarchy, and the intersectionality of identities. In Dalit literature, a feminist lens highlights the unique experiences of Dalit women and their struggles for equality within the caste system. Both Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* address themes of caste oppression, social justice, and identity, but they do so from different socio-political contexts and narrative techniques (Rege, 2006).

3.1.3 Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines race as a social construct, systemic racism, and how marginalized groups resist and navigate structures of oppression. Applied to Dalit literature, CRT provides insights into the construction of caste identities, discrimination, and anti-caste resistance. Dalit writers deconstruct the notion of "racial purity" and challenge caste-based hierarchies through narratives of solidarity and collective struggle. The role of language, memory, and historical narratives in Dalit literature disrupts dominant discourses and fosters critical consciousness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, a comparative analysis can delve into the multifaceted dimensions of Dalit perspectives, identity formations, strategies of resistance, and expressions of agency in literary works. This approach enriches our understanding of Dalit literature and situates it within broader discourses of power, representation, and social justice.

4.1 Themes, Motifs, Characters, and Narrative Techniques in Phule's *Gulamgiri* and Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*

4.1.1 Themes

Phule's *Gulamgiri* primarily focuses on themes related to caste-based slavery, the oppressive nature of the caste system, the need for social reform, and the empowerment of marginalized communities like Dalits. Phule critiques Brahminical dominance and advocates for the upliftment of the lower castes. On the other hand, Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* delves into themes of identity, self-acceptance, discrimination, and the struggle for dignity. Dutt explores the complexities of Dalit identity in contemporary India and challenges stereotypes and prejudices associated with being Dalit (Phule, 1885; Dutt, 2019).

4.1.2 Motifs

In *Gulamgiri*, key motifs include chains and bondage, symbolizing the shackles of caste-based slavery and the quest for freedom and equality. Phule uses powerful imagery to evoke the dehumanizing effects of oppression. *Coming Out as Dalit* employs motifs like masks and veils, symbolizing the concealment of one's true identity in a society rife with caste-based discrimination. Dutt explores the notion of unmasking and embracing one's Dalit identity with pride (Phule, 1885; Dutt, 2019).

4.1.3 Characters

Phule's *Gulamgiri* features characters who represent different facets of the caste system, including oppressed Dalits, oppressive upper-caste individuals, and reformers advocating for social change. In contrast, *Coming Out as Dalit* is a memoir that focuses primarily on the author's personal journey and the people she encounters who shape her understanding of Dalit identity and the challenges faced by Dalits in contemporary India (Phule, 1885; Dutt, 2019).

4.1.4 Narrative Techniques

Phule employs a didactic and persuasive narrative style in *Gulamgiri*, using historical anecdotes, arguments, and appeals to reason to make his case for social reform and the abolition of caste-based discrimination. Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* adopts a more introspective and reflective narrative approach, blending personal experiences with sociopolitical analysis to illuminate the struggles and triumphs of Dalit individuals navigating a casteist society (Phule, 1885; Dutt, 2019).

4.1.5 Socio-political Contexts

"*Gulamgiri*," authored in the late 19th century, coincided with India's colonial era marked by caste hierarchy, British colonialism, and social reform movements. Phule's seminal work played a pivotal role in contesting Brahminical dominance and advocating for social justice. In contrast, "*Coming Out as Dalit*" mirrors contemporary India's socio-political landscape, shedding light on persistent caste-based discrimination, systemic inequalities, and the ongoing struggle for Dalit rights and recognition. While both texts delve into themes of caste oppression and social justice, they offer distinct historical and narrative perspectives. Phule's work stands as a cornerstone in Dalit literature, focusing on systemic oppression and the imperative for social reform, whereas Dutt's memoir provides a personal and contemporary exploration of Dalit identity, highlighting the challenges faced by Dalits in present-day India.

Examining how Dalit women writers navigate various forms of oppression based on caste, class, and gender underscores the importance of intersectional analysis. By analyzing representations of Dalit women's agency, resistance, and empowerment in literary works, researchers can challenge stereotypical depictions and amplify marginalized voices. The comparative study of Jyotirao Phule's "*Gulamgiri*" and Yashica Dutt's "*Coming Out as Dalit*" significantly contributes to Dalit literature studies and the broader discourse on social justice and equity (Thorat, and Newman, 2007, Valerian, 2011, and Nair, 2018).

- **Historical Continuity:** By analyzing "*Gulamgiri*" from the late 19th century and "*Coming Out as Dalit*" from contemporary times, the research underscores the persistent nature of caste-based discrimination and the ongoing need for social reform and justice.
- **Diverse Perspectives:** The comparative analysis brings together two distinct voices from different time periods and narrative styles, enriching the discourse on Dalit experiences and showcasing varied approaches to addressing caste oppression and advocating for equity.
- **Complexity of Dalit Identity:** Both works delve into the complexity of Dalit identity, including issues of self-acceptance, discrimination, and the quest for dignity. This nuanced portrayal challenges stereotypes and offers deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of Dalit experiences.
- **Narrative Techniques:** Phule employs a didactic and persuasive narrative style in "*Gulamgiri*," using historical anecdotes and appeals to reason. In contrast, Dutt's "*Coming Out as Dalit*" adopts a more introspective and reflective narrative approach, engaging readers on emotional and intellectual levels.
- **Relevance to Contemporary Discourse:** The research highlights the ongoing relevance of Dalit literature in shaping discussions on social justice and equity, encouraging dialogue and action to address systemic inequalities and promote inclusivity.
- **Empowerment Through Representation:** Both works contribute to the empowerment of Dalit voices by offering platforms for expression, visibility, and recognition, fostering understanding, empathy, and solidarity within society.
- **Intersectional Perspectives:** The research encourages an intersectional approach by recognizing the intersecting identities and experiences within the Dalit community, such as gender, class, and regional variations, broadening the discourse on social justice and equity.

Overall, the research on Phule's "*Gulamgiri*" and Dutt's "*Coming Out as Dalit*" deepens our understanding of Dalit literature, amplifies Dalit voices, and contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on social justice, equity, and inclusive societal transformation.

5.1 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Jyotirao Phule's "*Gulamgiri*" and Yashica Dutt's "*Coming Out as Dalit*" reveals key aspects of Dalit perspectives across different eras. Phule's work, from the colonial era, challenges Brahminical

dominance and advocates for social reform, focusing on systemic oppression. Dutt's modern-day memoir explores personal experiences of Dalit identity and contemporary challenges. Both works highlight the complexity of Dalit identity, the importance of intersectional analysis, and the empowerment through representation. They contribute significantly to the discourse on social justice and equity, offering diverse perspectives on caste oppression and advocating for change. This analysis underscores the enduring relevance of Dalit literature in shaping discussions on social justice. By amplifying Dalit voices and challenging stereotypes, these works enrich our understanding of Dalit experiences and the ongoing struggle for dignity and recognition.

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