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BA English Honours | Semester VI | ENG6EJ301

Dalit Literature: An Overview

Module 1: Introduction to Dalit Literature: Ambedkar, Phule, and Revolt • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 1: The Historiography and Poetics of Dalit Literature

Dalit literature represents one of the most radical, emancipatory aesthetic and political movements in modern world literature. Emerging from centuries of institutionalized untouchability, caste segregation, and epistemic violence, Dalit literature rejects the metaphysical escapism and aestheticized complacency of Brahmanical canonical traditions. Rooted in the revolutionary philosophies of Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit literature asserts the primacy of human dignity, social equality, and structural rebellion.

1.1 Etymology, Ideology, and the Dalit Movement

The term 'Dalit'—derived from the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning ground down, oppressed, or broken to pieces—was adopted by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century and revitalized by the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra during the 1970s (inspired by the Black Panther Party in the United States). Unlike the patronizing Gandhian euphemism 'Harijan' (children of God), 'Dalit' is a proud, self-chosen political identity encompassing all historically broken and disenfranchised communities.

1.2 The Philosophical Foundations: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule

In his revolutionary manifesto *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar diagnosed the Hindu caste system not as a division of labor, but as a rigid **"division of laborers"** graded into an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt. Ambedkar demonstrated that caste cannot be reformed through moral pleading; it must be completely annihilated through the destruction of sacred scriptural authority (Shastras) that sanctifies hierarchy.

A generation earlier, Jyotirao Phule's foundational treatise *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873) dedicated its pages to the abolitionists of the American Civil War, establishing the first global subaltern solidarity. Phule unmasked mythological narratives (such as the Dashavatara) as instruments of Aryan conquest over indigenous peoples, establishing education and critical historical consciousness as the prerequisites for subaltern emancipation.

1.3 Sharankumar Limbale: Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature

In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), theorist Sharankumar Limbale formulated the autonomous aesthetic criteria of Dalit writing. Limbale argued that traditional Sanskrit *rasa* theory and Western formalist aesthetics are incapable of evaluating Dalit literature because they prioritize detached, bourgeois pleasure. In contrast, Dalit aesthetics is grounded in three core values: **human equality, freedom, and social rebellion**. The beauty of a Dalit text lies not in ornate wordplay, but in its authentic commitment to human liberation.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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poetics, and contemporary critical theory to uncover the ideological architectures underpinning literary texts and media artifacts.

1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

Critical inquiry into Module 1: Introduction to Dalit Literature: Ambedkar, Phule, and Revolt reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
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Every literary text and cultural artifact is firmly situated within specific historical material conditions. Understanding Module 1: Introduction to Dalit Literature: Ambedkar, Phule, and Revolt requires examining how contemporaneous social movements, intellectual revolutions, and material shifts in print and digital publishing influenced textual production. Furthermore, Hans-Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" demonstrates that textual reception is never static; each successive generation of readers reinterprets these works through evolving ethical, philosophical, and cultural frameworks.

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