



Editorial: Why should we read Dalit literature?

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Editorial: Why should we read Dalit literature?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl**Nicole Thiara**

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This special issue on Dalit literature is the first of its kind in a major English language journal. The editorial team of Dr Judith Misrahi-Barak, Professor K. Satyanarayana, and Dr Nicole Thiara are therefore proud to be able to introduce this area of literary studies to a wider audience. We are also aware that this collection of essays on Dalit literature can only highlight a limited number of concerns and critical approaches that constitute the fast-growing field of Dalit literary studies. Nevertheless, we consider this selection of essays both representative of key concerns and methodologies in this vibrant field, as well as indicative of new developments in the analysis of Dalit writing. We are also very pleased to have been able to include two interviews, one conducted with the film director Jayan K. Cherian on his provocative and cutting-edge film about Dalit land struggles, *Papilio Buddha*, and the second a dialogue between the Dalit poet Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and his translator Rowena Hill, which will address the specific challenges involved in the translation of Dalit literature. Since the preparation of this special issue and the end of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project from which it emerges, the collection of Chinnaswamy's poems *Before It Rains Again* (2016), translated by Rowena Hill, was published by erbacce press.

Dalit literature is a body of texts produced by writers whose caste background used to be referred to as “Untouchable” or “scheduled caste”, and whose writing engages with caste, caste discrimination, and Indian life from a Dalit point of view. The term “Dalit” means “crushed” or “ground down” in Marathi, and constitutes the *nom de guerre* that Dalit writers have adopted for themselves. The history and roots of Dalit literature is still in the process of being written and negotiated; in this special issue, Malarvizhi Jayanth exemplifies how this history is expanded in current research. The significant development of Dalit literature in its modern form is associated with the protest movement of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in the 1970s, a movement spearheaded by writer-activists such as Namdeo Dhasal and Arjun Dangle (Dangle, 2009). In the first essay of this special issue, written by a member of the editorial team, K. Satyanarayana, the key role in defining the political and aesthetic significance of Dalit literature is granted to the writer

and critic Baburao Bagul (1930–2008). Bagul, as well as the Dalit Panthers, and the subsequent tremendously rich body of Dalit literature emerging from Maharashtra, was deeply influenced by the writing and life of Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the most significant and revered Dalit leader and inspiration for many Dalit writers and activists. In her analysis of Dalit women autobiographies from Maharashtra in this special issue, Shoma Sen discusses the crucial role played by Ambedkar in the Dalit literature produced in Ambedkar's home state. There is no room to delineate here the complex and varied development of Dalit literature over the last 40 years, but dossiers and anthologies on South Indian Dalit writing sketch the different genealogies of Dalit literature in several states (Dasan et al., 2012; Purushotham et al., 2016; Ravikumar and Azhagarasan, 2012; Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, 2013). The histories of many regional Dalit literatures still remain to be written, though.

The essays here emerged from six academic events organized by the AHRC-funded research network “Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literatures”, between June 2014 and December 2015, which were convened by Judith Misrahi-Barak and Nicole Thiara, with local organizers where applicable.¹ The network is hosted by the Postcolonial Studies Centre at Nottingham Trent University in partnership with the research centre EMMA at the Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, and seeks to enable multidisciplinary dialogues on a body of literature that has hardly been studied outside of India. Within India, the huge, vibrant, and growing corpus of Dalit literature cannot be ignored, but its study is usually only half-heartedly supported by higher education institutions that are dominated by upper-caste academics. These academics often overlook or minimize the aesthetic merits of Dalit literature and consider it only for its social content, seeking to contain it as one of the examples of Indian literatures that broaden the canvas of the national literary landscape. Dalit literature is often seen as lacking refinement, and only offering the rawness of protest literature, that does not warrant its analysis as “proper” literature. Following the lead of the first collection of essays on Dalit writing, *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak (2015), this special issue foregrounds the analysis of aesthetic aspects of Dalit literature, without neglecting discussion of its political significance.

The contributors to this special issue are based in seven different countries and four continents, thus producing a truly international special issue, which is still rather unusual in the field of Dalit studies. It is also important to add that there is a mix of early career and established scholars contributing to this special issue, demonstrating that this is both an established, albeit marginalized, field of research and one that increasingly attracts promising scholars from both inside and outside of India. All of the authors of critical articles, apart from Satyanarayana, are women; which may or may not explain the focus on Dalit literature written by women in this special issue. Dalit women writers often had to struggle twice as hard to find the space to write and be heard, since Dalit women writers are discriminated against on the grounds of both their caste and gender. It is interesting that in the field of literary translation and the subsequent study of Dalit literature in translation, texts written by women appear to be privileged, with the study of Bama's work dominating the field (in this issue, for example, Teresa Hubel engages with Bama's novel *Sangati*).

The collection of essays is opened by one of the most significant and established Dalit critics, K. Satyanarayana. His dossiers on South Indian Dalit literature, edited with Susie

Tharu, enabled readers and scholars of Dalit literature who did not speak South Indian languages to engage with a wide range of literary texts in English translation for the first time, and illustrated the richness and diversity of Dalit writing in South India. His article in this special issue is potentially controversial in its vehement critique of the influential cultural critic D. R. Nagaraj (1954–1998). In the Foreword to Nagaraj's (2011) seminal collection of essays, *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*, Ashis Nandy praised Nagaraj for providing "the outlines of a culturally rooted and democratically sustainable radicalism of our times" (Nandy, 2011: ix) by exhorting Dalits not to deny "their gods and goddesses, ghosts and demons, parents and grandparents, ancestral lands and customs" (2011: xv), but to acknowledge India's rich cultural heritage of which they are part. Satyanarayana criticizes and rejects Nagaraj's recommendations for Dalit literature to claim a Hindu past, and juxtaposes Nagaraj's criticism with that of the Marathi Dalit writer and critic Baburao Bagul. Bagul advocates for Dalit literature's dismissal of its Hindu past in its totality, and programmatically declares: "Democratic socialism, the new sciences and technology, and the revolutionary present, form the essence of Dalit literature" (Bagul, 1992: 293). According to Bagul, Dalit literature must embrace modernity, but a modernity that is in the process of being transformed by Dalit literature in the interest of the oppressed and marginalized. Satyanarayana's article exemplifies the extent to which the various approaches to the study of Dalit literature are severely contested, and the source of passionate debates. It also exemplifies, however, the fault lines between the approaches of conventional postcolonial studies and the contemporary study of Dalit literature. Nagaraj's valorization of precolonial Dalit folk culture might be easier to accommodate by postcolonial studies than Bagul's endorsement of modernity, we would imagine. We would like to make a case for the importance of postcolonial studies' engagement with Dalit literature's "reconfiguration of modernity", as Satyanarayana outlines in his article, in order to push the boundaries of current postcolonial literary criticism, even if in the post-Second World War twentieth century it was difficult for postcolonial studies to accommodate the fact that the oppression in India was coming from within and not only from without. The literature produced by some of the most silenced communities in India cannot continue to be ignored, even though engagement with Dalit literature challenges the way postcolonial studies is conceptualized and taught. This special issue opens up a debate that encourages postcolonial studies to evolve and respond to contemporary concerns in formerly colonized and neocolonial contexts.

The currently most prominent and most widely translated and studied genre in Dalit literature is that of life writing. The analysis of life writing and autobiographies is therefore well represented in this special issue, in articles by Laura Brueck and Shoma Sen, who cover different regional Dalit writing and whose articles illustrate that even in this relatively well-established branch of Dalit literary studies, much groundbreaking work is being done and remains to be done. In her article on two women's autobiographies in Hindi, Brueck takes issue with contemporary approaches to the study of Dalit autobiographies, in particular Dalit women's autobiographies, and calls for the reconceptualization of this genre. Brueck draws attention to the limitations inherent in analysing Dalit women's autobiographies predominantly as *testimonios*, as narratives of witnessing, partly because this runs the danger of encouraging critics to neglect the study of formal characteristics and individual features of texts, and to simplify the gender politics at work in Dalit women's life writing. As Brueck's article also demonstrates, only in the

field of Dalit literature in Hindi has significant work been done outside of India and have book-length studies of Dalit literature been produced, such as Brueck's own (Brueck, 2014) and the works of Toral Jatin Gajrawala (2013) and Sarah Beth Hunt (2014) (all of whom can engage with this material in its original language). As in other articles in this special issue, the autobiographies that Brueck discusses are either not yet translated into English, or are in the process of being translated.

In her article on Dalit women's autobiographies, Shoma Sen discusses two seminal but very different autobiographies by Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, both written in Marathi and translated by Maya Pandit. Sen's article focuses on the way in which Dalit feminism is outlined in these autobiographies, and how the life narratives are constructed in relation to their environment, with particular emphasis on the location of the village and the city. As Sen emphasizes, the notion of Dalit feminism is still in the process of being explicitly theorized by Dalit writers. Dalit women have seen themselves sidelined by India's mainstream feminism, which is reluctant to engage fully with questions of caste and caste discrimination, and they see themselves at the margin of the Dalit political and literary movement. Sen traces the changes in Dalit women's self-representation by looking at one of the earliest texts written by a Dalit woman. Baby Kamble wrote autobiographical material in the 1960s and hid it because she did not dare to have her family and community know that she was writing the story of herself, and more specifically, the story of her Dalit community. Sen compares Kamble's text with the autobiography written by one of the most active and outspoken Dalit women, Urmila Pawar, who was also an inspiring speaker at two of the conferences organized by our network, the conference at the University of East Anglia in July 2015 and the Pune conference at Savitribai Phule Pune University in December 2015.

Teresa Hubel's article breaks the mould of Dalit literary studies by focusing on the liberating and subversive feminist potential of the use of swearing and sexual language in Dalit women's literature. There has been considerable commentary on the presence of crude and obscene language in Dalit women's texts, but never has this feature been celebrated as in Hubel's analysis. Hubel's article on the representation and function of swearing in female Dalit writing, in particular in Bama's *Sangati*, is refreshingly different in both content and style, and therefore possibly a particularly apt model of analysis for a body of writing that is precisely and deservedly famous for its groundbreaking narratives that challenge every rule set by conventional mainstream publishing. Hubel's article does not keep a polite distance from the texts under analysis, but suggests that we can all learn from the power of swearing and mine its feminist potential.

Life writing is the most prominent genre in Dalit literature but one should not underestimate the political and aesthetic impact of other genres: as numerous anthologies attest, poetry is a domain where many Dalit writers excel; and fictional, and metafictional, creation also imbues the imaginary with political power, be it through the short story or the novel. The article by Dolores Herrero is one of the first to discuss Meena Kandasamy's controversial novel *The Gypsy Goddess*, and implicitly makes a case for the use of critical paradigms that have not been developed with Dalit literature in mind. This novel is originally written in English, and is one that very explicitly interpellates the "Western" reader who is trained to recognize postmodernist features and poststructuralist discourse. Herrero delineates the use of postmodernism in this novel and discusses its

ethical and aesthetic implications. She draws attention to the experimental features of Dalit literature and illustrates how this novel in particular comes close to “exceeding” postmodernist experimentation. There is an unbridled inventiveness and relentless challenging of what is conventionally understood as literary in Dalit writing. This radical experimentation is read and valued quite differently by different audiences, and one needs to bear in mind that the Dalit texts earmarked for translation into English often appear to be the ones that are most self-reflexively experimental (Thiara, 2016).

Malarvizhi Jayanth’s article is an example of a branch of Dalit literary studies that seeks to shed light on marginalized literary histories of Dalit literature. Her focus is on Ayothee Thass (1845–1914) and his creation of useful and usable histories for Dalits in Tamil Nadu, histories that rewrite the development of caste and untouchability, and which are articulated through the literary analysis and reinterpretation of Buddhist texts. This type of research breaks new ground, as do so many articles in this volume. Equally groundbreaking is Jayan K. Cherian’s feature film *Papilio Buddha* (2013), in its creation of a distinctive poetic cinematic style that nevertheless produces a rigorous and hard-hitting critique of caste discrimination and uniquely captures the Dalit land struggle in Kerala. He kindly agreed to be interviewed by us, and here discusses his two feature films, the second one being *KaBodyscapes* (2016), and his political and cinematic vision. In the final piece of this special issue, the Dalit poet Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy and his translator Rowena Hill discuss his poetry and the distinct challenges that the translation of Dalit literature and poetry present.

To conclude this Editorial, we must stress that Dalit literature is in the midst of a persistent struggle against often brutal and crushing caste discrimination and oppression, and Dalit writers and critics are rightly wary of having their voices represented, misrepresented, and appropriated by both upper-caste Indian scholarship and Western academia. As conveners of the international research network “Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literature”, we are conscious of the privilege of our outsiders’ position, quite removed from the battlefields of caste in India, but grateful for the trust we have been granted by our Indian colleagues. Through the network events and the network publications such as this one, we want to increase the visibility of Dalit literature and its scholarship. As it devotes a whole volume to the analysis of Dalit literature, this special issue of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* is highly symbolic in the way in which it brings together scholars from across different continents, cultures, and languages, from India, Europe, the United States, and Canada, Dalits and non-Dalits. In a Western academic context, Dalit literature is slowly becoming part of the postcolonial canon, which is to be welcomed, but this involves challenges: the study of Dalit literature requires an in-depth contextual knowledge that may not have been so urgently necessary for the analysis of South Asian literature written in English. With Dalit writers becoming trained in creative writing workshops within academic institutions, and their desire to address an audience directly in English and with literary forms that a Western reader knows, the Dalit literary landscape is also swiftly transforming. As well as facilitating access to a different readership, English offers a language where caste is not as deeply or differently inscribed as in Indian languages. Bearing these complex contexts in mind, we hope that *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* readers will enjoy the articles and interviews in this volume, and explore Dalit literature for themselves. There is no doubt that Dalit

authors by and large want to participate in global debates and seek to address, and deserve, a wide audience.

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Note

1. Details can be found on the website <https://dalitliterature.wordpress.com>. A YouTube channel has also been created and includes some recordings from the conferences: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCe2s1_7J9-XpbsTn8ixRdnQ.

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