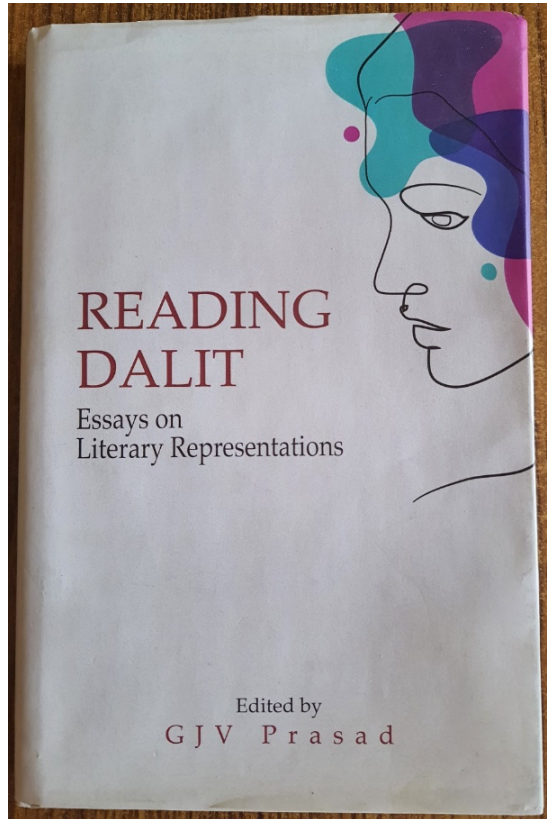


GJV Prasad, ed. *Reading Dalit: Essays on Literary Representations*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2020. 172 pp. ISBN 978-93-82178-04-0.



Any contemporary study of India is incomplete without addressing the question of caste. The post-1990s has witnessed an increased assertion and awareness among Dalits. The term Dalit has now come to signify a claimed identity for the previously oppressed and exploited communities on the basis of caste. Dalit literature is created, crafted, published, and discussed as a social movement inseparable from its political commitment to dismantle the caste system. It questions the strategic exclusion of Dalit concerns and their stereotypical representation in mainstream literature. Considering the persistent problems existing with class- and caste-related issues in India until now, the significance of Dalit literature in shaping the socio-cultural worldview in the country cannot be

overestimated. As the blurb of this book aptly claims, Dalit writers break barriers at multiple levels, those imposed by language hegemonies and hierarchies. Their struggles are to seek space in social and academic realms and in the process they reveal the politics of languages.

The present volume under review seeks to bring together different and at the same time multifarious readings of Dalit literature. This compilation of essays, penned during the time span of fifteen years of the early twenty-first century, examines several issues such as: similar forms of discriminations in other countries, the representations of Dalits in English literature, the self-representation of Dalits by themselves, Dalit writings and its theorisation, the ever persistent complexities of translations, caste discriminations cutting across religious boundaries, the combinations of gender and caste, and relations of language and power. In the introduction, the editor offers two insightful and significant observations. The first one involves adhering to the label of Dalit literature in the singular form in order to continue with its professed political momentum and underline the unity of the cause to fight against caste. The second important issue situates Dalit literature within the latter half of the twentieth century and the early 21st century, emphasising its re-assessment of the past and its potential to fashion an egalitarian future. Therefore, Dalit literature is to be read not as an addendum to an already existing framework of Indian literature, but as integral to its very idea.

This volume contains fifteen essays on diverse topics pertaining to Dalit literature ranging from its politics and aesthetics to the power of languages. It contests within the standardised regional languages of India, translations into English, protests of writers, and also pulls of the publishing industry. The discussion on texts comprises of Dalit literature written in various Indian languages, namely Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, Gujarati, Malayalam, and also translations into English. The contributors include scholars like Devendra Chaubey, Meena Pillai, Alladi Uma, Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, Madhu Singh, Subhendu Mund, Krupa Shah, K. Satchidanandan, M. Sridhar, R. Azhagarasan, K.A. Geetha, GJV Prasad, Arunima Roy, B. Mangalam, and Milind Eknath Awad. Since most of the essays have been published earlier in different books and journals, the year of publication mentioned at the end of each essay provides a finer understanding in charting the trajectory of the Dalit discourse.

In his interesting essay, Devendra Chaubey analyses Shimazaki Toson's novel *Hakai* (1906) about the Buraku (Eta) community in Japan, who are treated as untouchables. He finds that the scope of the term 'Dalit' can be expanded to include challenges posed to multifarious inequalities across the world. Meena Pillai in her study investigates the market forces operative in translations into English, and the appropriation of marginalities as saleable commodities in the form of mainly life writing. She cites the example of *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004), her narrative written by Bhaskaran and translated into

English by N. Ravi Shanker. Alladi Uma in her essay highlights the complexities of translating the Dalit experiences through a discussion of her own attempts at translations involving gender and caste perspectives, specifically G. Kalyan Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2000), a novel enriched with the oral cadences of varieties of Telugu. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar analyses the poetry and impact of Chokhamela and his family in the thirteenth-fourteenth century. Since these *abhangas* critique as well as challenge casteist and stultified traditions, she argues that this poetry can be read as an important precursor to twentieth-century Marathi Dalit literature.

Madhu Singh examines the domains of literary representations through a study of Mahasweta Devi's *Kunti and the Nishadin* (originally "Kunti o Nishadi" [2004]), recounting a significant instance from the *Mahabharata*. She highlights the ways in which literary representations of the marginalised may be misleading and contrived by dominant ideologies. Subhendu Mund presents various examples of Dalit representation in the Indian novel in English, marking a growing awareness of the question of caste. He concludes that it is only at a later stage that more engaging works of the Dalit discourse will be written specifically by Dalit authors, published and discussed further. Krupa Shah analyses Ramnarayan Vishwananth Pathak's Gujarati short story "Khem" (1928), as it was influenced by social reforms particularly on untouchability led by M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948). K. Satchidanandan reads Namdeo Dhasal's poetry as expressions loaded with rebellious streaks along with an incisive appreciation of Dilip Chitre's translations into English, drawing attention to the act of translation itself. Milind Eknath Awad locates the mass conversion of Dalits into Buddhism led by Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956), as an amalgamation of religious as well as social and political factors. The caste stigma is eliminated in favour of a sovereign and secular society.

A cluster of essays discusses the fecund domain of Dalit literature in Tamil. M. Sridhar examines the nuances of language and nation through a reading of the earlier poetry of Meena Kandasamy (1984-). Her confrontations and combinations with/of English and Tamil along with a gendered subjectivity provide a unique series of expressions. R. Azhagarasan emphasises the influence of Edward Said (1935-2003) and his theorisation of knowledge and power on post-1990s Tamil culture. He notably expresses gratitude to Said for decoding the formulation of the "Other," and specifically extends it to the context of caste. K.A. Geetha discusses the Dalit feminist stance in Tamil with allusions to Bama's *Sangati* (2005) and Imayam's *Beasts of Burden* (2001). Both texts deal with the predicament of Dalit women. Differences within the Dalit community among *parayars* and *vannati* are also considered.

GJV Prasad observes that caste crosses over boundaries of religion, and reflects on the curious history of Christianity in Tamil Nadu with reference to Bama's *Karukeku* (2000). The distinctive situation of Dalit Christians is also noted.

Arunima Ray analyses two novels by Tamil Dalit women authors – Bama’s *Sangati* (2005) and Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* (2006) – and highlights the structures of oppression impinged on by caste and gender discriminations. She stresses the need to recognise and acknowledge the differences in Dalit women’s discourse. B. Mangalam traces the trajectory of Tamil Dalit literature as a strong assertion of the Dalit self. Her focus is not only on the often-observed remarkable growth in Tamil Dalit literature in the 1990s but also on much earlier in works like Seenivasan’s *Jeeviya Churukkam* (1939).

This collection of essays featuring many lesser known Dalit texts and aspects, provides an eclectic mix in mapping the academic field of Dalit literature. It presents a variety of texts and thoughts in a single volume enhancing its scholarly significance and easier accessibility. In fact, it can be considered a handbook for any reader who is keen to know about the texts and contexts of Dalit literature, especially about its emergence and development as a critical genre in the field of marginal, subaltern, and postcolonial literature.

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