

**MARATHI DALIT AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITINGS: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DISPLACEMENT AND
SENSE OF BELONGING**

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ABSTRACT

The comparative study of the writings of Baby Kambale, Shantabai Kambale and Alice Walker brings out a common issue and feeling i.e. lack of homeland and sense of belonging in the life of both African Americans and Marathi Dalits. Both the writings demand justice and reform for their people. The reform implies the urgent and genuine 'feel' of being at home – a sense of belonging, a sense of possession, a sense of dignity, a sense of self esteem, a sense of autonomy, a sense of integrity, a sense of brotherhood, a sense of strength and so on. The paper is an attempt to analyze the select works and bring out the commonalities and differences regarding displacement and sense of belonging in both African Americans and Marathi Dalits. The paper refers the theories by Edward Said, Jasbir Jain, Gramsci, Ashis Gupta, Homi Bhabha, Bharati Mukharji to analyze and explain how both Marathi Dalits and African Americans in the respective colonial reign lost the sense of belonging. It applies the historical perspective to find how it happened. The forced displacement and acceptance of both by the respective colonialist can be also seen from their (Dalits and African Americans) 'usefulness to a society'. The paper also brings out the basic differences between the two literatures.

Key Words: *Sense of belonging, displacement, utopias, nation space.*

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The writings of both Marathi Dalit and African American writers are addressed to their own people. Urgent and strong need of survival and depletion of love are the common themes of both the writings. Baby Kambale says that she wrote about her life experiences because she wanted to tell this to the new Dalit generation. Through their writings Alice Walker, Shantabai Kambale and Baby Kambale hope for reformation. The reform for both African American and Dalit writers implies the urgent and genuine 'feel' of being at home – a sense of belonging, a sense of possession, a sense of dignity, a sense of self esteem, a sense of autonomy, a sense of integrity, a sense of brotherhood, a sense of strength and so on. In the case of Dalits the idea of lack of homeland doesn't apply. But here what is important is the 'feel'. Dalits are the aboriginals of India and India literally belongs to them. Dr. Ambedkar complained to Gandhi that Dalits felt homeless in their own land. The following view of Edward Said throws light on the feeling of homelessness of Dalits. According to him:

Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that people have planned to think about habitation, but it also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. (Said 5)

Aryans forcefully controlled the habitation (land) of Dalits and expelled them from their own territory. Shantabai Kambale and Baby Kambale describe Dalits living on the outskirts. In *Jina Aamucha* Baby Kambale describes the celebration at 'fair of buffalo' on full moon day in the month of Aashadh. Power holders in the village would join the fair. Patil along with Mahars would take the buffalo to the temple. Then the Patil would kill the buffalo. Such participation of the power holders would be the strategy - consent and coercion - exploited by Aryan, the invaders. Through such strategies the aboriginals were tamed and brought

under their patronizing shed. Dalits' displacement was in reality a forced displacement. By means of war Aryan usurped Dalits' indigenous territory. This resulted in Dalits' loss of territorial sovereignty and control. Aryans forced Dalits to give up their claims on the territory by imposing upon them laws of Hindu religion and new social structure. This resulted in cultural displacement of the aboriginals. According to Gramsci both consent and coercion are exploited according to the needs and nature of the situation. Wherever taming through consent doesn't work coercion is used.

How does one belong to? What is a feeling of being at home? Bharati Mukherjee while claiming the status of an immigrant writes, "I need to feel part of the community I have adopted, I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference I can." (Quoted Jain 240) According to Mukherjee an immigrant should be the integral part of society. He should be accepted as equal by the host of the land. But the acceptance Dalits and African Americans by their respective oppressors was based on "the usefulness to a society." (Quoted Jain 239) Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Meridian* and *The Temple of My Familiar* describes the pathetic and pitiable condition of the black slaves working in the houses and on the farms of the white. The slavery of Blacks in America was the socio-economic need of the time in America. While Varna system in India relegated Indian aboriginals to the lower strata of the society. It was a socio-economic need of the higher castes. Therefore the acceptance of both the African Americans and Dalits by the colonizers was based on their 'usefulness to a society'. They were never accepted as equals and their inclusion in the society was meant for their exploitation. So African Americans and Dalits didn't develop a sense of belonging. Yet the exploitation and lack of the sense of belonging of Dalits cannot be seen as similar to that of African Americans because slavery in America itself was the product of modern economy of America which can be traced to three hundred years back.

With British rule capitalism and modernity entered India. British rule proved to be supportive in the emancipation of Dalits from the ancient oppressive socio-cultural and economic structure that can be traced to three thousand years back. Baby Kambale describes her father's story. He became a small contractor by rejecting the social structure of the village. The British rule provided him the opportunity to rise socio-economically. His upward mobility from casteist structure to casteless structure generated and controlled by British rule became possible. Mulk Raj Anand too, in *Untouchable*, has looked at science and technology as a solvent to the traditional problems of Dalits regarding scavenging dirt.

Therefore it is necessary to think about the period of colonized life of both –African Americans in America and Dalits in India, which is respectively of three hundred and near

about three thousand years. The striking difference between period of colonized life of both African Americans and Dalits brings out one major issue i.e. displacement about which Baby Kambale and Shantabai Kambale seem to write nothing, rather they write about their fixed marginalized dwellings i.e. on the outskirts of villages. Dalits have no memory about their indigenous places in India because since their displacement generations have passed and they have been accepted as Hindus (Hindu religion is rather thrust on them) by the Aryans. According to Bisoonadath "the process of belonging finally culminates into acceptance but when race and origins govern this fact, separateness is thrust on the subject." (Jain 240) Every Dalit community, before three thousand years, lost its territorial sovereignty and was forcefully displaced from its indigenous places and was fixed as outcaste – physically as well as socially. Therefore the search for roots in other country i. e. in Africa which forms the major concern of African American writing cannot be seen in Dalit writings. In *The Color Purple* Walker searches her roots in Africa. Nettie, Celie's sister, goes to Africa as a missionary. Dalit writers' major concern is the lived experiences i. e. the only space in which they can represent themselves. It is the space left for the 'Other' which is fixed (fixity) by the higher caste.

If Dalits felt any sense of belonging it was because of their 'acceptance' as a part of Hindu religion by higher caste. This acceptance is nothing but a form of Gramsci's consent, a political strategy. Participation in Dalits' rituals such as worship of deities is also a kind of acceptance of the rituals of Dalits' and an appropriation of Hindu religion, which occasionally gave a feel of pride to Dalits (Baby Kambale). This also brings out the limited and approved space specified by higher caste for Dalits which had been very politically maintained by higher caste for such long time. (3000 years) It also shows how Dalits failed to create a space for themselves. African Americans on the contrary established their own Black church within Christianity – featuring the African shouts, songs and ways of worshipping. The article "African American Culture" notes this.

During slavery many slaves were stripped of their African systems and typically denied free religious practice forced to become Christian. Slaves managed, however, to hang on to some practices by integrating them into Christian worship in secret meeting. These practices include dance, shouts, African rhythm and enthusiastic singing remain a large part of worship in the African American church. (African American Culture, Web)

It didn't take much time for them to create some space for their collective self. In a short period of three hundred years as compared to a three thousand years history of Dalit

oppression, African Americans could achieve spiritual wholeness by creating space for themselves, which Dalits couldn't. Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* achieves the spiritual wholeness.

The situation of African Americans and Dalits are different. The situation of African Americans can be termed as Diaspora as a consequence of colonialism while "Dalits" is a colonized situation but different from the British colonialism in India. The colonial situation of Dalits is analogous to that of Red Indians in America. The different socio-historical condition of African Americans and Dalits raise the question about a sense of nationness which is still further complicated by the socio-cultural and religious exclusive alterity that was formed by the respective colonizers. Both African Americans and Dalits were never accepted as an integral part of the respective religions - Christian or Hindu. Theirs have always been an exclusive and peripheral existence giving them a sense of being the 'Other'. Edward Said also, regarding oriental 'Others', points out that the colonizers "had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Others.'" (Mongia 112) This kind of alteration of the lives of the colonized has been always a political strategy exploited by colonizers.

It's not only religion but, according to Satish Deshpande, "an identifiable territory is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the emergence of a strong sense of Nationness" (Chatterjee and Jaganathan 168) because both physical territory and religion are formative factors of metaphysical collective representation. They function at imaginative level- the imaginative functioning of lack of "real places - places that do exist." (Chatterjee and Jaganathan 171) America, as a geographical location, has been an alien place for African Americans, which deprived them of the Nation-space and consequently a 'feel' of home. Therefore African Americans' struggle has been always for a wider space, sometimes which also took them back to Africa both physically and mentally. But for Dalits, being Indian aboriginals their struggle has been for 'utopias' i.e. "sites with no places ---. They are abstract spaces with no immediate or necessary reference to any concrete place. They may represent 'society itself in a perfected form'." (Chatterjee and Jaganathan 170-171) They wanted to belong to the society of which they had been the lowest part which almost deprived them of any social and human space. (untouchability) African Americans too were deprived of social space in America but due to their forced migration from Africa, and America being a nationalist country Nation-space too formed as integral part of their struggle. On the other hand Dalits who were mostly struggling for elementary needs were allowed no space in the National struggle (struggle for freedom) which was totally controlled by elites in India. At the same time social space was their urgent need.

It's true that both the colonizers and colonized, impact each other – directly or indirectly. This impact was also forced through coercion on colonized and through consent on the colonizers which is very obvious in the relationship between higher caste and Dalits in India. But the socio-cultural and historical differences between the colonizers (Americans and Aryans) and the colonized (Blacks and Dalits) were obvious and realized by both. Alterity or 'Othering', as cultural identity, gets formed within the subject through the power of inner compulsion, which mentally cripples and deforms the victim leaving him baseless and rootless, (homeless) caused by the imposed power within the socio-cultural milieu. Therefore the commonality or similarity regarding the revolutionary struggle of the powerless (Blacks and Dalits) against the powerful colonizers (Whites and higher caste) cannot be brought at a generalized or universal level of victimization and exploitation of the powerless. The local socio-historical context, of each forms the most subjective experience of each caste/race.

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