

Review Article

Dalit in the 21st Century Classroom: A Review of *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*

Eds. Tapan Basu, Indranil Acharya and A Mangai, *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780199467600. Pages: 159, Price: Rs. 250/-

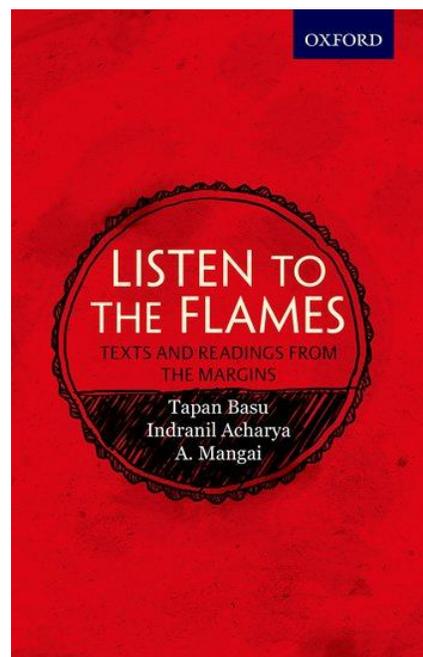
Reviewed by Arpita Raj

Research Scholar in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University.

Email: arpitaraj21@gmail.com

Standing on the platform of the postmodern century the lived experiences of pain, suffering, anguish, injustice and violence of the marginalised section have been translated into reality through the editors of the book, *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins*. To speak in one word, Dalit is undoubtedly a condition. There is a gulf of difference between the then society of the Dalit and of the present. Even, the writers (both Dalit and non-Dalit) have to face the challenge to translate Dalit ideology' through the literary pieces. *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins* is no doubt a unique glimpse to the social, geographical, political and historical representations of Dalit visionaries to rejuvenate tender minds to the direction of Dalit ideology for the centuries to come. Students of today will be motivated by its diversification, multicultural journey, unconventional dogmas, and alternative aestheticism beyond the mainstream literature.

Under such background, the editors of the book, *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins* have very successfully accomplished their job. The editors have most probably completed their three fold job in representing the marginalised voices. Firstly, the book has appropriately represented the voices that had been marginalised for a long time. The voices that had been suppressed by the machination of the higher caste society find representation through the writings of both Dalit and non-Dalit writers. The second important thing is that the book has showed a great concern for the pain and suffering, pathos, anguish, anger, protest, injustice and oppression meted out to the downtrodden. Lastly, the book has fulfilled the need of the undergraduate and post graduate students and has introduced them to the socio-political situation inter-woven with Dalit reality. It can be said that the editors are more than successful in achieving all the above concerns. The anthology has dealt with the works of twenty one significant Dalit writers. The editors of this



volume have included a number of genres like prose, poetry, short stories, drama, autobiography, biography, memoirs etc. by famous Dalit writers. The anthology brings into focus the voices in twelve Indian languages. The languages are Tamil, Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati, Malayalam, Assamese, Odia, Punjabi, Hindi, Telegu, Marathi and Kannada. The inclusion in English is from B. R. Ambedkar's writings. The introduction acquaints the readers with an overview of Dalit scenario. The lucid description by the editors on the important issues is divided into neat paragraphs with apt sub-headings - 'caste: definition and manifestations', 'class and caste', 'caste and race - debate revisited from untouchable to Dalit', 'anti-caste movements', 'Ambedkar's legacy', 'caste and patriarchy', 'the complexities, Dalit assertion after Ambedkar', 'the aesthetics of Dalit writing', 'addressing caste'-offer a suitable classroom teaching to the undergraduate students. The issues work as the eye-opener in respect of the studies of Dalit literature. In the anthology, the writings of both famous writers like Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* and Bama's *Just One Word* and less significant writing like Susil Mandal's poem, *The Sunderbans*, are noticed. Jayant Parmar in a direct way has addressed his words in his poems *The Last Will of a Dalit Poet* and *I am a Man like You*. Sri Lakshman's autobiography, *Undying Love* translated from Kannada by Susheela Punitha has dealt with the problems of love and marriage of a couple from lower caste society. In the story, *Just One Word*, Bama has captured the caste sentiment of Indian society. An autobiography by Sadalakshmi, *The Last Places for a Dalit Women*, focuses on the strong will that turns woman from lower caste to a state minister. C. Ayyappan's short story, *Madness*, Achintya Biswas's drama, *Portrait of Ambedkar*, Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography, *Against the Night*, Indranil Acharya's *Agony* etc in a certain way introduce the readers to the histories of 'other'. These works often speak about the loss, sufferings, violation, anger and search for an identity of the Dalits.

The anthology fulfils the demands to be a textbook of Dalit literature for the undergraduate students. Each of the entries in the anthology contains a biographical note of the author, observation of the author and a brief introduction. A series of questions in the form of exercise and activity has followed each text in the book.

In 2011, Chandra Bhan Prasad founded a temple at Banka village in Uttar Pradeesh². The name of the resident deity is goddess of learning English. He acknowledges this deity as the ruling goddess of Dalit renaissance. On one hand the goddess holds a pen and on the other she clutches the Constitution of India - a text that has attempted to restore the human dignity of Dalit people. Most of the Dalit intellectuals could not deride the dominance of English culture. They think English invasion in India challenged the rigorous caste system and helped in the development of a liberal outlook. *Listen to the Flames: Texts and Readings from the Margins* contains a few stories that capture this divergent perspective of the colonial history. However, this love of English language and culture does not limit itself to blind imitation. The first-generation authors of the Dalit society have internalized the influences of modern language, religion and culture on their own terms. In fact, the future of 'Indian' identity lies in the hands of these new breed of Dalit authors who may successfully resist colonial hegemony of two hundred years and script a new history of modern India. That is why Tamil Dalit poet Rajkumar, the son of a witch doctor, speaks of his exotic roots in his poems. His poetry becomes a repository of the myths, folk rituals, magic and folk beliefs prevalent in his society. A sense of pride and belonging to his primitive community manifests itself in his modern poems. The poem thunders curses at the upper-caste people - curses that reflect suppressed anger of centuries. The reader notices a subversion of the stereotype of Brahminical wrath and resultant curses. This genuine Dalit resentment and retaliation seems no less powerful than the upper-caste rhetoric of aggression.

Notes

1. Dalit ideology' is primarily a home ground movement started in India against the oppressors. Though the plight of the oppressed classes is a global phenomenon, it is special in the context of India as the caste issues are mixed up with the economic deprivation.
2. Banka is a small village in the district of Lakshmipur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh. The village is famous for the temple of the Goddess of English. The temple is built up with an aim to encourage local Dalits to learn English language. In the temple more than three feet tall idol is in the shape of a computer holding a pen and a copy of Indian constitution.

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Arpita Raj is a Research Scholar in the Department of English, Vidyasagar University. Her area of interest is on one of the most important tribes in India- Santals and their culture, society, literature and religion. She has published articles on “Beyond the Canon of Mammoth: An Eco-cultural Reading of Santal Folktales” and “Similarities of Culture and Religion of the Santals and the Hindus: A Study”. She has attended conferences and seminars on Santal literature, culture and their identity. Email: arpitaraj21@gmail.com
