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## CASTE CHRONICLES: THE ROLE OF DALIT VOICES IN LITERATURE AND CINEMA IN RESHAPING INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Caste, a deeply entrenched social construct in India, has perpetuated systemic inequality and marginalization for centuries. Amidst this backdrop, Dalit voices in literature and cinema have emerged as powerful agents of change, challenging the status quo and offering a platform for the oppressed to articulate their lived realities. This paper explores the transformative role of Dalit narratives in reshaping India's cultural, social, and political landscapes.

Dalit literature, rooted in the anti-caste movements led by visionaries like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, vividly portrays the struggles, resilience, and aspirations of marginalized communities. Through its raw and authentic storytelling, it has dismantled stereotypes and inspired social reform. Similarly, Indian cinema, traditionally dominated by upper-caste narratives, is witnessing a paradigm shift with the rise of films that boldly address caste discrimination, untouchability, and social justice. Movies like *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Article 15*, and *Sairat* have not only ignited national discourse but also amplified Dalit perspectives in mainstream media.

By analyzing the intersection of literature and cinema, this paper highlights the enduring impact of Dalit art in fostering awareness, empathy, and resistance against caste oppression. It also examines the challenges of representation and appropriation faced by Dalit creators in a predominantly upper-caste cultural industry. Ultimately, the study underscores the potential of these narratives to dismantle systemic barriers and pave the way for an inclusive and equitable India.

**Keywords:** Dalit Literature, Indian Cinema, Caste System, Social Justice, Oppression.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system, one of the most rigid and hierarchical social structures, has shaped Indian society for millennia. Its oppressive framework has historically relegated Dalits—the so-called "untouchables"—to the margins, stripping them of dignity, rights, and opportunities. Despite constitutional safeguards and social reform efforts, caste-based discrimination continues to pervade modern India, manifesting in various forms of social, economic, and cultural exclusion.

Amidst this systemic oppression, Dalit voices in literature and cinema have emerged as powerful mediums of resistance and transformation. Dalit literature, grounded in the lived experiences of the marginalized, provides an unvarnished account of oppression while articulating dreams of justice, equality, and self-respect. In parallel, Indian cinema, long criticized for its caste-blind narratives, has seen a wave of films that address caste realities with sensitivity and authenticity. Together, these art forms serve as both a mirror reflecting the harsh truths of society and a tool to challenge and reshape the dominant cultural narratives.

This paper examines the pivotal role of Dalit literature and cinema in exposing caste injustices, amplifying marginalized voices, and driving social change. It delves into how these mediums have not only redefined cultural expression but also acted as catalysts for awareness and reform, offering a platform for India to confront its deeply entrenched caste hierarchies.

Dalit literature has transcended geographical boundaries, resonating with readers across various Indian languages and literary traditions. This diverse and dynamic movement is exemplified by works like *Kusumbale* (Kannada) by Devanoor Mahadeva, *Karukku* by Bama, and *Korku Song* by Daya Pawar, which collectively articulate the experiences of Dalits from different regions. Daya Pawar's English poem *Korku Song* offers a poignant portrayal of the Dalit voice in Maharashtra. The poem sheds light on the struggles and aspirations of the Korku tribe, an Adivasi Dalit community in the region. As a prominent Marathi Dalit writer, Pawar captures the tribe's rich cultural heritage and the challenges they face in their ongoing fight for justice

and recognition.

Indian cinema has played a pivotal role in addressing caste-based prejudices and spotlighting Dalit issues. Filmmakers have utilized the medium to portray the challenges, discrimination, and resilience of Dalit communities. With their broad reach, films have been instrumental in raising awareness about caste-based inequalities and the urgency of social reform. Numerous movies have delved deeply into Dalit themes and caste dynamics, highlighting the struggles faced by Dalit individuals, their aspirations for progress, and the profound impact of caste discrimination on their lives.

Notable examples include Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974), Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat* (2016), Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019), and Dr. Biju Kumar's *Perariyathavar* (Names Unknown, 2014). These critically acclaimed films have significantly influenced the discourse surrounding Dalit issues. Despite the persistent challenges of caste-based prejudice and social injustice, Dalit literature and Indian cinema have been essential in shedding light on Dalit struggles and aspirations. These art forms continue to foster empathy, promote understanding, and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Nagraj Manjule's acclaimed Marathi film *Sairat* has garnered recognition both in India and internationally. The film centers on an inter-caste romance, shedding light on caste dynamics and the challenges faced by the Dalit protagonist. Its widespread popularity among audiences and critics alike has contributed to the growing prominence of Dalit narratives in Indian cinema.

Similarly, Anubhav Sinha's hard-hitting Hindi film *Article 15*, inspired by real events, follows an upper-caste police officer investigating the disappearance of two Dalit girls in a remote village. Through its compelling storytelling, the film exposes deep-seated prejudices and injustices in Indian society, particularly the struggles endured by Dalit communities.

Indian cinema has taken on the vital task of representing Dalit experiences and confronting caste-based oppression. Filmmakers have harnessed the power of cinema to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes, and highlight the realities of Dalit lives. The synergy between Dalit literature and Indian cinema demonstrates the transformative power of storytelling in driving social change. Both mediums play a crucial role in reshaping perceptions, fostering empathy, inspiring collective action against caste discrimination, and working toward a more just and equitable society.

Vasant Moon's autobiography focuses on the widespread social injustice and caste-based discrimination faced by Dalits in India. Moon vividly portrays how Dalits are relegated to the lowest tier of the social hierarchy, making them vulnerable to mistreatment and indignities. The book reveals the dehumanizing practices of untouchability, highlighting how Dalits are denied access to temples, wells, and other public spaces, further deepening their marginalization.

*Article 15* addresses the pervasive issue of caste-based discrimination and violence, particularly in rural India. The investigation depicted in the film uncovers the brutal realities faced by Dalits, especially Dalit women, shedding light on the horrific crimes committed against them and the impunity often enjoyed by the perpetrators.

The resilience and determination of the Dalit community amidst adversity are also emphasized in the narrative. The struggle for dignity and equality is a central theme, illustrating their efforts to overcome the challenges of an oppressive social structure. The author's pursuit of education and eventual success as a writer exemplify the unyielding spirit of Dalits in their fight against discrimination.

*Article 15* exposes how systemic apathy and corruption perpetuate caste-based injustices. The film reveals how institutions like the police and judiciary often favor the powerful while neglecting to protect Dalits. It underscores the urgent need for structural changes to dismantle these entrenched inequities. Similarly, Moon's autobiography provides a comprehensive exploration of the effects of caste-based discrimination on Dalits' lives, detailing how it impacts their education, employment, and social relationships.

The character of Ayan Ranjan, an upper-caste police officer in *Article 15*, addresses the notion of privilege. As Ayan delves into the investigation of a brutal caste-based crime, he confronts his own biases and recognizes the importance of using his privileged position to advocate for justice. The film emphasizes the moral responsibility of privileged individuals to challenge and reform social hierarchies.

Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India* offers an intimate, firsthand account of the psychological and emotional toll of caste discrimination on Dalits. Through vivid anecdotes, Moon paints a raw picture of the daily struggles faced by Dalits, calling for collective action against caste oppression. In contrast, Article 15 uses a fictionalized narrative and visual storytelling to present a broader commentary on societal inequities. The film employs powerful imagery, evocative dialogue, and dramatic elements to immerse viewers in the harsh realities of caste-based violence.

Both works serve as compelling critiques of caste-based discrimination. Moon's autobiography highlights the need for social transformation, urging Dalits to unify and fight for their dignity. The book challenges the deep-rooted hierarchies that perpetuate inequality. On the other hand, Article 15 stresses the necessity of systemic reforms, focusing on institutional accountability and the enforcement of constitutional principles like equality and justice.

Moon's narrative lays bare the horrors of untouchability, detailing the humiliation and violence endured by Dalits in rural Maharashtra. Similarly, Article 15 graphically depicts caste-based atrocities, including sexual violence and systemic exploitation, urging viewers to confront these often-overlooked realities.

Both works critique the societal norms that sustain caste-based prejudice. Moon's account encourages readers to question the status quo, while Article 15 exposes the inefficiencies and biases within the justice system, emphasizing the role of corruption in enabling caste violence.

Together, *Growing Up Untouchable in India* and Article 15 provide invaluable insights into the struggles of the Dalit community. Moon's deeply personal account evokes empathy and understanding, while the film's broader approach uses fictional elements to highlight systemic issues. These narratives humanize the Dalit experience, fostering solidarity and a collective call for action to combat caste-based injustices.

Both works underline the need for societal and systemic reforms to eliminate caste oppression. They emphasize the importance of education, unity, and awareness in empowering Dalits and advocating for an inclusive and just society. By bringing Dalit experiences to the forefront, these powerful mediums promote empathy, challenge entrenched prejudices, and inspire collective efforts toward a more equitable India.

## II. CONCLUSION

The empowerment of Dalit narratives, the dismantling of caste-based prejudice, and the promotion of social reform in India have been significantly influenced by Dalit literature and the Indian film industry. Two notable examples are Vasant Moon's autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, and the film Article 15.

In *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, Moon offers an intimate and introspective account of the challenges faced by Dalits in rural Maharashtra. Drawing from his personal experiences, he sheds light on the horrors of caste-based discrimination while celebrating the Dalit community's resilience and fight for dignity. The autobiography serves as a profound social critique, challenging traditional ideologies, advocating for reform, and underlining the urgent need to abolish the caste system.

Similarly, Article 15 addresses caste-based injustice through a cinematic lens. The film, centered on the character of Ayan Ranjan, explores the harsh realities endured by Dalits while critiquing systemic flaws within the legal and social structures. Its dramatic narrative and visual storytelling bring to light the institutional biases that perpetuate caste-based discrimination and violence.

Both works revolve around the themes of caste oppression, social inequality, and the perseverance of the Dalit community. While Moon's autobiography provides an intensely personal and reflective perspective, Article 15 uses the power of drama and imagery to drive its message. Through these narratives, readers and viewers are exposed to the lived realities of Dalit experiences, making the issues more tangible and relatable.

Together, Dalit literature and Indian cinema challenge societal norms, amplify the voices of the oppressed, and encourage empathy and collective action against caste-based injustice. By humanizing the Dalit experience and highlighting both struggles and triumphs, these mediums promote greater understanding, solidarity, and the vision of a more inclusive and equitable society. As these platforms continue to intersect, they hold the potential to drive significant social transformation, fostering a fairer and more just India.

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