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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## An Overview of the Major Trends of Contemporary Gujarati Literature

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The present research paper attempts to understand the diversity of the contemporary Gujarati literature by attempting to categorize it into broad segments: mainstream literature, feminist literature, Dalit literature, diasporic literature and nativist literature. It also outlines some of the key features of these categories along with its main protagonists. This overview of the contemporary trends in Gujarati literature reveals not only a great quantitative growth in literary writings but also a qualitative transition and diversification of expression and intention. Such literature is a celebration of plurality and openness of the society. The paper argues that as literatures are always dynamic and flowing with the movement of time and space parameters, Gujarati criticism also needs to update its tools to analyze, examine, interpret, and evaluate such literatures which have a new global context.

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**An Overview of the Major Trends of Contemporary Gujarati Literature:-**

Literatures are always dynamic and flowing with the movement of time and space parameters. The political, social and cultural events and transitions always have a big impact on the literature as well as on its form and content. Even what we call literature and change has got redefined over a period of many centuries. Hence, there are alternative historiographies and approaches to the understanding and interpretation of literatures written at different points of time during the last millennium. How one can analyze change in literature, how literatures change and how they retain their continuity, which concepts and methods could analyze change in literature satisfactorily are valid theoretical questions for students of literature.

Gujarati literature has also gone through different phases of evolution and transformation and has been shaped by the political, social and cultural changes taking place in its macro environment. These transitions in Gujarati literature are generally divided into several 'eras' or *yugas* as they are called: early period, medieval period and modern period. The early period is also called the pre-Narsinh Mehta period of Gujarati writings. Jain monks and scholars are believed to be the earliest writers of Gujarati literature. Jain monk Hemchandracharya (born circa 1088) wrote the first grammar of Gujarati language. He also wrote a manual of poetics in Gujarati and laid the basis of the development of Gujarati writing during the subsequent reign of the Solanki dynasty in the ancient town of Patan in Gujarat. The medieval period begins with the poetry of Narsinh Mehta in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and stretches upto the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and covers the creation of several Bhakti tradition writers. The modern era begins from around 1850 and covers a very eventful era up to the recent period. It is worth noting that such periodization of Gujarati literature often lends itself to questioning based on historiographical grounds as well as based on the tools of inclusion and exclusion made by literary scholars in characterizing the various periods of literary writing.

The contemporary period of Gujarati literature, which is often called the *anu-adhunik yuga* (post-modern period) by literary historiographers, is the most striking among these *yugas* for its diversity of subjects and expressions, fragmentation, tendency for experimentation, playfulness of language and search for connections between the text the

context. These writings display a kind of subjectivity that was unknown earlier and shuns the prescriptive and moralistic approach demonstrated by the writers of the Gandhian era.

Over the past three decades, particularly after the beginning of the globalizing processes in culture and society, Gujarati literature has proliferated and expanded in quantitative terms. That is to say, the number of articles and books, poems, novels, short stories, plays and critical writings published in Gujarati and the number of authors writing such literature is far greater than the number that prevailed in the pre-independence era and the decades immediately following independence. Of course, such quantitative growth of literary production can be a subject of divergent and at times conflicting evaluation in terms of its qualitative features.

If we analyze the creative writings of the last few years, we discover that its content is full of diversity. Gujarat is a state of variety of cultures and dialects. This socio-cultural context gives a unique identity to the literature belonging to a particular region. Therefore, the contemporary literature in Gujarati language has become literatures of such cultural identities today. Apart from what may be loosely called the mainstream writings, there are writings that have region-based cultural touch and are suggestive of upcoming areas of the future. This touch is so neatly woven into the literary texts that it can be felt everywhere - from the experience to the expression.

Any attempt to categorize literatures into different divisions based on historicity or qualitative features is fraught with the risk of oversimplification and exclusion of certain kinds of writings from such established categories. However, for the ease of understanding a cluttered and confusing space, it is also necessary to classify and categorize literary writings of the present era. In that context, one can broadly divide the literary writings in Gujarati in the contemporary era into the following categories:

1. Mainstream literature
2. Feminist literature
3. Dalit literature
4. Nativist literature
5. Diasporic literature

The mainstream literature in Gujarati has had the longest literary tradition in comparison with the other categories of literature. A writer rooted in mainstream literature tries to work upon and express finer and universal experiences of human life. Cultural identities and circumstances specific to space and time are not the central elements in such literature. Besides, post-modern epistemology and orientation are at the basis of the creative and critical activity of contemporary mainstream Gujarati writers. Many of the post-modern writers use a nonlinear timeline; the author may jump forwards or backwards in time. Hence, their cultural and historical references at times appear to be not fitting the content. Litterateurs like Bhagavatikumar Sharma, Raghuveer Chaudhari, Sitanshu Yashaschandra, Ramesh Parekh, Suresh Dalal, Vinesh Antani etc. can be seen as representatives of mainstream literature carrying forward the general and universal human expression in their literatures. The most notable post-modernist Gujarati writers of the current era are Suman Shah, Harish Minashru and others.

Dalit literature is the literature of the underprivileged and depressed communities. It is the literature that gives voice to the anger and suffering of the suppressed masses - voices that are struggling for socio-economical and cultural justice for centuries. Such literature has become a means for the Dalit communities to establish their separate and empowered identity. The violent anti-reservation agitations in Gujarat in the early 1980s gave a definite shape and momentum to Dalit literature in Gujarati. Expressions in this kind of literature abandon the old sophistication and refinement. They expose readers to the rawness and starkness of the experiences of the people who face exploitation at the hands of the dominant castes. Human rights, human dignity, fight against social injustice and spread of equality are the guiding values of Dalit literature. Today there are several exclusive magazines and associations that are devoted to Dalit writings in Gujarati. The main Dalit voices in contemporary Gujarati literatures are: Mohan Parmar, Harish Mangalam, Nirav Patel, Yashwant Vaghela, Tikesh Makwana, Dalpat Chauhan, Joseph Mackwan, Chandu Maheria and others.

The feminist literature is the literature representing the aspirations and identities of women. It often focuses on the struggles of women to achieve and maintain equality in a male-dominated and patriarchal society. Feminist literature expresses the desire for such restructuring of the value system that leads to a more humane and fair treatment for women. Issues of power, equality, unfair treatment in family spaces, denial of rights at workplace, control over reproductive processes and decisions are recurrent themes in feminist fiction and non-fictional writing. The novels and poems of Himanshi Shelat, Bindu Bhatt, Panna Naik, Ranjana Harish, Usha Upadhyaya, Varsha Adalaja etc. bring out the distinct aspiration of the women.

Nativist literature has the strong consciousness of the hometown, local place or the sub-region. It highlights the unique socio-cultural tradition and flavour of a particular locale and the struggle for identity and predicaments of the people of that area. It is the literature of belonging-ness and connection with a certain locale and ethnic community. The word 'native' evokes, in a way, unwelcoming, stereotyped impressions of primitiveness or cultural backwardness. However, the writers belonging to this category are trying to change this typical perception of the 'native' by putting forward the pleasant and valuable facets of such 'native' traditions which need to be preserved and appreciated. Self-conscious and assertive use of local dialectical expressions, idioms and indigenous metaphors characterize these writings. Manilal Patel, Kirit Dudhat, 'My Dear Jayu' (pseudonym of the author), Ajit Thakore and others are representatives of the nativist Gujarati literature.

Creations and expressions of the Gujarati diasporic community are an important constituent of the Gujarati literature today. The non-resident Gujaratis, settled in countries as far apart as USA, UK, New Zealand, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Australia, Fiji and the Gulf states, are important participants in their host countries. However, the sense of loss of roots and real or perceived threats to their cultural and linguistic identity in an alien place often lead to their resort to literature as a means of identity assertion as well as release of cultural stress by the diasporic writers. In US, UK as well as African states, the diasporic Gujarati literary community has established literary academies and the litterateurs from Gujarat are often invited for lectures of poetry recitation for the benefit of people of Gujarati origin living there. One important characteristic of the Gujarati diasporic literature is that it wants to retain its connectivity to its motherland. Vipul Kalyani, Panna Naik, Priti Sengupta, Madhu Rye, Babu Suthar, Dahyabhai Patel etc. are important voices of Gujarati diasporic literary community.

The above analysis clearly indicates that the literature of Gujarati language has diversified today into different categories. It represents a collection of voices and reactions against the process of becoming homogenized people under globalization. It is no longer a homogeneous and monolithic entity it used to be perceived as during its earlier era. The landscape of literary creation is quite fragmented and diverse in terms of its nature and direction. The contemporary Gujarati literature establishes and celebrates the cultural and local identities. We can also designate such literature as the literature of identities. Of course, such identities have also been reflected in mainstream Gujarati literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, when we go through the experience of reading today's literatures of identities, we find that that it exhibits a qualitatively different treatment and expression than what was characterized by the literature of the earlier periods. The self-consciously identity-rooted literature today is more exclusive, assertive, and indigenous in its character.

One needs to understand the reasons for such fragmentation and diversification of literary landscape in Gujarati. Of course, one can adduce several reasons for this - both generic and specific - which are related with the literatures of different variety in Gujarati. However, one of the important reasons is the influence of globalization and the literatures of other languages of the world on literary perceptions and creativity of writers of Gujarati language. Globalization might appeal to us if we see it through the perspectives of economic and technological development. It has opened the doors to international markets, technologies and migration for people. However, cultural globalization, driven by information and communication technologies and the worldwide marketing of western cultural products, is also understood as a process of homogenization, and as the penetration of western mass culture at the expense of traditional diversity. Globalization has thus created homogenizing cultural pressures in the contemporary era. Such homogenization leads to the assertion of identities in literary creations as a means of preservation of the language and cultures of Gujarat and the Gujaratis. Another reason is the socio-political empowerment of the different communities like the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, nomadic communities etc. and the welcome induction of their members into literary mainstream. The spread of literacy and higher education among the members of the marginalized communities and conscious attempts to encourage writings by them has added to such diversification.

A review of the contemporary trends in Gujarati literature uncovers not only a great quantitative growth in literary writings but also a qualitative transition as well as a diversification of expression and intention. It is also a celebration of plurality and openness of the society at the present juncture. With the emergence of these literatures of identities and diversification of literary creativity, Gujarati criticism also needs to update its tools to analyze, examine, interpret, and evaluate such literatures which have a new global context. The normative and epistemological foundations of the various identity-based literatures tend to be different and should be analyzed separately rather than based on the theories of critical evaluation of mainstream literature. Gujarati criticism, therefore, needs to engage in a more theoretical dialogue to cater to the changed needs.