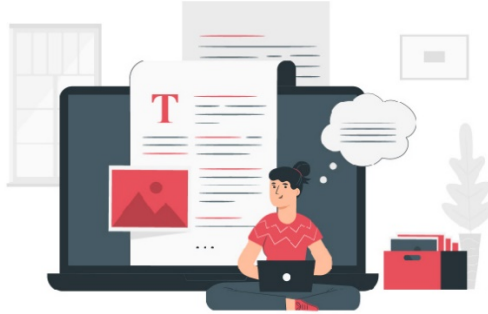


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Namdeo Dhasal, an Angry Panther: A Study of Selected Poems

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Abstract:

Representation of Dalits in the writings of non-Dalit writers in the pre-Ambedkar period was mostly removed from what Dalits truly are; Dalit characters were typically portrayed as “helpless and childlike people”. However, the emergence and rise of Babasaheb Ambedkar as a national figure motivated Dalit writers to take literature as an instrument of authentically exposing the age-old persecution inflicted on Dalits by the upper-caste population. Among others, Namdeo Dhasal is one of such writers in the world of Dalit literature who is closely associated with the larger Dalit movement. Dhasal’s poetry, though reckoned as Dalit literature is not confined to the depiction of the pain and sufferings of the untouchable section only; he used poetry as an instrument to portray the grief and misery of socioeconomically rejected population as well. The purpose behind his poetic compositions was to bring together people of different castes, communities and faith. The present paper is a study of four randomly selected translated poems of Namdeo Dhasal from the collection of Dalit poems “An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems)” (Anand and Zelliott). The selected poems are “Their Eternal Pity”, “Now, Now”, “Ambedkar: 1980”, and “On the Way to the Durgah”. The study and analysis of the selected poems apart from establishing Dhasal as an accomplished poet with the dexterity in handling the poetic form and language, provides an access to his attitude and approach towards caste discrimination.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Namdeo Dhasal, Caste discrimination, Dalit movement, Ambedkar.

Introduction:

Namdeo Dhasal, “the poet of the underworld” as he is familiarly known, is the product of age-old exploitation inflicted systematically by the socially, economically, and politically privileged section of the society upon the socio-economically deprived ones; and his poetry is an inevitable byproduct of this exploitation. His poems are outbursts of his hatred, anger, and dissatisfaction that he imbibes against the social system which gives power, privilege, and

authority to the socially higher section and marginalizes the lower section of society. Though occasionally Dhasal's language becomes "surrealistic and bizarre" but it never fails to give a "vivid and documentary kind of" tone to his poetry (Chitre).

Dhasal's poetry embodies the true essence of Dalit literature which is closely tied with the larger Dalit movement. The term 'Dalit' can be translated as oppressed, downtrodden, depressed (Omvedt and Eleanor). The term 'is now used by politicized Untouchables in preference to any other designation' (Zelliot 1). Namdeo Dhasal, a Mahar by birth was born in the 'twin' villages of Pur-Kanersar near Pune in 1949. From his childhood, he directly came into contact with caste oppression and discrimination. According to Dhasal himself, his villages "are dominated by the caste system and its many *jati* or community segregations. Under the direct or indirect influence of religious traditions, our people naturally observed the do's and the don'ts of untouchability." (Dhasal and Chitre 35). In a period spreading about two thousand years, Mahars have the history of serving as 'all-purpose servants, watchmen, messengers, and removers of dead cattle in village and towns' (Dharwadker).

Although the Mahar caste has a history of raising their voice against the upper-caste persecution, it was not until 1920's that its protests started to take a revolutionary form under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Ambedkar, by publishing newspapers, establishing the People's Educational Society, and several political organizations, attempted to consolidate the Mahar movement and spread its anti-caste politics to such other untouchable castes as Mangs, and Chambhars. In 1956, Ambedkar led a mass conversion drive among the Dalit population to Buddhism in order to mark the freedom of the various untouchable castes from the caste-bound Hinduism; in the drive 'two million people took the vows to become Buddhist laypersons' (Hovell 66). Apart from marking the rejection of 'untouchability' and 'the whole system of gods, myths, rebirth, pollution and caste' (Zelliot 12), the conversion 'provided psychological freedom' to the untouchable castes. The mass conversion marked the emergence of 'Dalits' as a new class (Dharwadker).

Dhasal's poetry, however, does not confine to the depiction of the pain and sufferings of the untouchable section of the society only; he uses poetry as an instrument to portray the grief and misery of the socioeconomically rejected population. Therefore, starting from pimps, prostitutes, criminals to gangsters, tamasha artists, and mujra dancers, anyone from the depressed section of the society could find a spontaneous articulation in his poetry. In order to fulfill his dream of bringing together people of different castes, communities, and faith, he founded Dalit Panther in 1972.

Methodology:

The present paper studies a few randomly selected translated poems of Namdeo Dhasal from “An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems)” (Anand and Zelliott) as its primary source of material. Each of the poems in the collection explores different facets of Dhasal’s poetic excellence and temperament that generally characterize his poetry. The poems selected for the current study are: “Their Eternal Pity”, “Now, Now”, “Ambedkar: 1980”, and “On the Way to the Durgah”. Further, in order to develop an insight into different contexts relevant to Dalit movement in general and Dhasal’s poetry in particular, a methodological study of secondary sources, such as books and journal were studied.

Discussion:

In this section, all the selected poems considered for the present work will be analysed one by one from the Dalit perspective. In the poem “Their Eternal Pity”, which originally was a part of the Marathi collection of poems “Golpitha” (1973) by Dhasal, he lays bare the hypocrisy of the upper-caste people. The poet has incorporated two groups of deictic words in order to underline the gulf between the Dalits, the oppressed, and the upper caste people: i) *us, this, ours, we*, and ii) *their, they, those, theirs, them*. While he aligns with the first group of words, he alienates himself from the second group of deixis. Dhasal scathingly highlights the two-facedness of the upper-caste persecutors by comparing their pity to that of “the pimp on Falkland Road”. He calls the socially privileged population the “Lords of wealth” who have their houses in tall buildings, whereas the Dalits like him do not get a place to shelter even in the “sidewalks”. The miserable life of the downtrodden has been depicted as “so beggarly” that it feels like “nausea to be human”; they even cannot fill their “shrivelled gut even with dirt”. Dhasal’s sarcasm finds its best expression in the concluding lines of the poem.

“Each new just day supports them as if bribed--
not a sigh slips through the fingers of day’s plenty
as are cut down.”

Dhasal uses the term “just” in an ironic sense; nature, which normally favors none, seems to support the upper-caste people in every respect as if bribed. On the other hand, the downtrodden fails to receive true sympathy in the form of “a sigh” even when they “are cut down”. The poem is expressive of Dhasal’s anger and hatred for the social system that is biased towards privileged ones and discriminates against the depressed section.

In “Now, Now”, another poem translated from the Marathi collection “Golpitha”, Dhasal speaks of the miserable predicament of his forefathers who have a history of century old suffering. His disappointment with the past becomes obvious when he addresses his ancestors as “pilgrims of darkness” who “journeyed through centuries” not towards the light but “with their backs to the sun”. His desperate yearning for an immediate and positive change can be traced from the way he enumerates each one of his resolutions with “Now, now”. Due to the constant carrying of “burden” and being in darkness for ages, his predecessors have become physically bent; Dhasal urges, “Now, now we must lift that/ burden from his back.” Further, in the construction work of “glorious city”, the Dalit wage-laborers have invested their sweat and blood. However, in return, they have never been paid back with the reward and respect they deserve as human beings; all they get is “the right to eat stones”. This instigates Dhasal to burst out violently, “Now, now, we must explode that building which kisses/ the/ sky!” After a thousand years of darkness, burden, labour, and hunger, he says, there arrives “a sunflower-giving fakir” to the rescue of the downtrodden and persecuted Dalits. The term “fakir” bears a clear reference to Ambedkar who apart from making the Dalits aware of their predicament showed the path towards “the sun”, the source of light. This is when Dhasal gives a clarion call, “Now, now, we must, like the sunflowers, turn our faces to the/ sun.” “Now, Now”, thus, deals with the themes of age-old suffering of the Dalits in the hands of the upper caste society, their subsequent consciousness of this misery under the leadership of Ambedkar, and their eventual revolt against the biased social system.

Another aspect of Dhasal’s writing is his appreciation of Ambedkar; once he himself wrote “whatever I did, my foundation was Ambedkar’s vision” (Dhasal and Chitre 38). He penned several poems on Ambedkar glorifying the latter’s role in the upliftment of the Dalits and their identity. “Ambedkar: 1980” (originally published in the Marathi collection “Tuhi iyatta kanchi”) is one of such poems where Dhasal sings the praises of Ambedkar within the canvas of five sections. The first section of the poem begins with an acknowledgement of Babasaheb’s eternal presence and relevance among the Dalits: “You died, but didn’t cease to be.” He lived an ordinary life of a common man, however, “There was no acting in it/ No dramatics/ No imitation, no imitators”. His priceless contribution in the enrichment of the Dalits is testified by succeeding Dalit generations who got the opportunity to become “Academician/ Technician/ Politician/ Scientist/ Philosopher” only because of his foresighted efforts and provisions made in India’s constitution. There was a time when upper-caste population avoided physical contact with the Dalits while giving water, restricted Dalit students

to enter the classroom, stopped the Dalits from entering into god Vithoba's temple, and allowed them to enter the village only during high noon in order to avoid their so-called polluting shadows. Categorically referring to all of these instances of discrimination, Dhasal writes twice, "Now this is old stuff", and it has become possible only because of Ambedkar's exertions.

The next section is self-introspective in nature. Dhasal confesses that at times he 'cursed', had disagreements with, or said wrong things against Ambedkar; however, it is followed by an immediate confession that Mahars like Dhasal can today afford to curse, argue, and disagree only because of the power bestowed upon them by Ambedkar. A Dalit's present-day place and identity in society owe everything to Ambedkar.

In the third section of the poem, the poet affirms that though many things have been done in the upliftment of the Dalits, Ambedkar's dream of equality for all is far from being materialized; the Dalits continue to suffer even today. Dhasal bluntly states, "A mendicant can be Prime Minister here/ but not a Mang or a Bhangi." The lines bear political connotations; in politics, a non-Dalit electoral candidate begs like 'a mendicant' in order to win votes without discriminating between Dalit and non-Dalit votes. Interestingly, when someone from the Dalit community, whether 'a Mang' or 'a Bhangi' or a Mahar for that matter wishes to become Prime Minister, he will be outrightly disapproved on the basis of "jati" or "varna". Dhasal's anger does not stop here, he portrays how the parliamentary preambles and human suffering hold no value in front of political corruption and financial supremacy.

"In front of the chair, the parliament's value is less
In front of the law, the prostitute's value is less"

In these lines, the bard does not target the upper-caste section only, he targets the corruption-infested Dalits as well. In the concluding lines of the third section, Dhasal ironically refers to Ambedkar's dream of equality. Now, the Dalits have become equal to the higher caste population in terms of corruption and moral degradation.

The fourth section of the "Ambedkar 1980" reports how he was motivated by his mother to nurture the image of Babasaheb Ambedkar as "True/ Holy/ Beautiful" in his childhood. On some Friday, the speaker's mother gifted him "An arithmetic book, a slate, / and one piece of chalk" with a lament that she never learned how to read and write; she urged him further to "Take a look at this book" and start his education by writing 'B for Babasaheb' instead of writing "Shri Ganesh". Writing "Shri Ganesh" is a traditional practice for a

Maharashtrian child. According to the mother, Ambedkar is “the lord” of the people who “comes from among men”, “is true, holy, beautiful”, and it is because of him that books became meaningful for the Dalits, “Otherwise this book has no meaning.” In the fifth and final section, Dhasal states how his struggle with the thoughts and ideas rendered in the poem kept him awake until “three O’clock” in the morning. Now he wants “to have a drink”, but he knows that any ordinary drink cannot quench his thirst for a world which is free from “all forms of exploitation - economic, social and cultural” (Dhasal and Chitre 42). He concludes the poem with his final desire to “sleep peacefully” and wake up next day with “no varnas, no castes”.

“On the Way to the Durgah” is another short poem by Dhasal that speaks a lot of his caliber as a poet. Within the canvas of nineteen lines, he is able to successfully portray the life of an orphan in the first person. The opening lines of the poem startle the reader by abruptly describing how the speaker was born when “The leaking sun/ Went out” i.e., in the evening “on the pavement”. The subsequent lines elaborate briefly that he was “An instant orphan” as his mother died immediately after his birth. What is thought-provoking to note here is the portrayal of her death as something relieving; her death is presented as a journey to meet the “father in heaven” where she will be safe. The lack of security for a woman in the streets, especially at night, is further signified by the use of the term “vampires”. Just like vampires are believed to become active and go on hunting at night to quench their thirst for human blood, lusty men on the pavement crave for human blood when they see a lonely woman on the pavements at night. With her father, the woman will be safe from these perpetrators, and even if she had any stains in her sari, in heaven all the “stains of darkness” will be cleaned up. Further, the dexterity of Dhasal as a poet can be seen in the way the speaker is made to address his mother as “The woman who delivered me” instead of mother; this effectively underscores the missing attachment between the son and the delivering mother as he fails to recollect anything of his mother. Cut away from mother’s care and love, the speaker grows up into a man “whose fuse/ Has been blown” consuming “roadside shit”. Now “on the way to the Durgah”, he begs by shouting “Give me five cents/ I’ll give you Five punches”. The poem establishes Dhasal as a good observer who could successfully read the pain and suffering in the eyes of the downtrodden and socially neglected population. How a mentally disturbed beggar may have an emotionally disturbing and agonizing past is depicted in the poem in a simple but powerful way.

Thus, the few poems by Namdeo Dhasal selected for the current study portray Dalits not as “helpless and childlike people who cannot make their own decisions or take action”

(Mukherjee 8). On the contrary, in these poems Dalits have been portrayed as individuals who have their own voice, who can protest, and above all, who, like any other (non-Dalit) human being, possess their own virtues and vices. With that being said, the dark history of age-old persecution and exploitation of the Dalits in the hands of the socially and economically privileged ones never goes unmentioned or unstressed.

Conclusion:

In the present study of the four selected poems, it can be seen that, as an insider, Dhasal had the knack of portraying the pain and suffering of not only the Dalits but everyone who is “socioeconomically ostracized”. His portrayal of the depressed and the oppressed is sympathetic but at times he is found angered by the biased and discriminating caste-based social system. While “Their Eternal Pity” exposes the wide socio-economic gap between the Dalits and the upper-caste people, “Now, Now” stresses on an impending change that will lead the Dalits towards light, knowledge, and self-discovery. “Ambedkar 1980”, apart from spelling out Ambedkar’s contribution to the development of the Dalits throws light on many of his unfulfilled dreams; it also speaks of how Dhasal was introduced in his childhood to Ambedkar by her mother. Finally, “On the Way to the Durgah” reveals the agony and hardship of footpath dwellers without any particular reference to caste. His unorthodox way of writing makes his poetry unanimously appealing; though his anger for the caste-based social system and discrimination seems to overpower his expressions while depicting the deplorable predicament of victims, he does not let it blunt the sharpness of his attack on the system.

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