

THE FLAMES OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE IN THE POETRY OF NAMDEO DHASAL

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Namdeo Dhasal is one of the revolutionary writers of Dalit Literature. He wrote nine anthologies of poems and each one of his poem reflects the agony of downtrodden. His most famous work is 'Golpitha' which was his first poetry collection published in 1971. This paper attempts to explore the elements of social injustice through the autobiographical notes of Namdeo Dhasal and also focuses on the poetic contribution of Namdeo Dhasal in the field of protest literature through analysing his selected poems. Dhasal, who is a great rebel Marathi poet, writes with a mission—mission to fight a verbal war against all forms of exploitation whether it is economic, social or cultural. He chooses female as the mascot for representing the downgraded and the stigmatized among humankind. Being dissatisfied with the present set-up, the poet in Dhasal wishes to demolish it. He raises his voice against sacred books that have divided mankind on the basis of religion. When the poet in Dhasal thinks of destruction and construction, he shakes hands with Marxism and Ambedkarism. He is a poet of the underworld in true sense because his poetry offers an action plan that will unite all the dalits beyond order and border. Despite its sarcastic tone, it is effective in appeal because of its mission—mission of opposing all forms of exploitation.

Keywords: Dalit literature, social injustice, marginalized, Marxism, Ambedkarism

Namdeo Dhasal is one of the prolific writers in Dalit literature. His poetry is the voice of socially discarded and marginalized people. His excessive use of harsh words in his poetry aims to translate the violent existence of Dalits, through which the readers can observe the burning flames of social injustice. Dhasal writes that *Golpitha* was “an observation and the most vivid depiction of Dalit identity, in my opinion, can be seen in ‘*Man, You Should Explode*’”. (Dhasal, *Golpitha*) The poem is an exaltation to allow life to unravel. He does not shy away from expletives as he asks his readers to cuss, punch, and shape out innards, murder, and even gang rape. (Dhasal, *Golpitha*) The poem shocks the neo-liberal reader automatically, but a slower reading allows us to understand that the references to a gangrape are possible allusions to the upper caste man’s tendency to rape lower caste women in a public display of power. Dhasal de-sanitized the poetic space by invoking imageries of menstrual blood, phlegm, snot, and “shit”. His call for a revolution, displeasure with religion, and dreams of one humanity were rooted in his communist faith. Unlike other poets who wrote in abstract terms, Dhasal grounded his work in the tragedies of his everyday life. He saw this not only as tragedy, but also as poetic imagery that deserves to be shared with a world so different from his. It felt as if Dhasal had already exploded and was inviting others to join him. ‘*Water*’ is another equally compelling work, evoking guilt with every effortless swig. It appositely captures the politics

of everyday objects that only those excluded might notice. He writes, “*How even water is taught the caste system*”. In his interview with Chitre, he said, “*For what makes one speak or write is the themes that create an excruciating turmoil inside you, heighten your sensitivity and leave you tenderly troubled*” (Web). How artfully he instilled that same turmoil within us.

The discrimination between the haves and have-nots is the longest existing system of hostility and unfortunately is still in existence in various forms. Religion, caste, gender, sexuality, culture, tradition, economic status is some of the major factors that drag some particular communities to the margin who are known as subaltern. In course of time the subaltern start speaking and questioning the mainstream supremacy through all the possible ways among which literature occupies a major role. Through dismantling the pre-existing, pre-compiled traditional literary history, the marginalized community embraces the subaltern identity and exposes the menacing, unsounded real world. Dalit poetry is one of the strongest branches of protest literature with powerful themes and the selection of piercing words that contain the angst and anguish of the oppressed community.

Namdeo Dhasal's contribution to Dalit poetry gains worldwide acknowledgement with his extremely powerful social realistic poems. His poems not only expose the caste oppression but also discuss the social problems which are considered lewd to be addressed. He uses his poetry as a revolting weapon and its effects in the society are also analyzed. A close reading of his poetry makes a reader aware of his focus on the social realistic and existentialist elements and the relevance of the bugging or haunting style which he executed in the expression of marginalized realities. “I do not create values,” wrote Henry Miller once, “I defecate and nourish” (Ashok, 13). The poems in *Golpitha* often contain a scatological element, or even an elemental scatology and their reader needs a strong stomach to withstand their relentlessly repulsive ethos. And yet, there is a tragic lyrical luminosity about the evocative brutal imagery, the savaging of humanity with its muffled cry of pain that the poems carve out.

Dhasal employs hyper-masculine and aggressive imagery to represent his fellow subalterns' repressed rage and to motivate them of the necessity to assume control of their lives and dignity. The powerful wresting of control from the supremacists' grip translates into violent imagery in his works. The most accessible part of his poems is their allegorical and didactic stanzas where Dhasal is either venting the venom of his anarchistic desire to destroy every civilized institution, to get rid of its malignant aspects, or where he is speaking of the exploitation of the underclass and the under caste in universal terms and is proclaiming a global revolution on their behalf. “Man you should explode Yourself to bits to start with Jive to a savage drum beat... Man, you should keep handy a Rampuri knife, A dagger, an axe, a sword, an iron rod, a hockey stick, a bamboo. You should carry acid bulbs and such things on you. You should be ready to carve out anybody's innards without batting an eyelid” (Dhasal, *Poet...*, 34).

The hegemonic power structure prevails in India drags a number of communities to the margins on social, political, cultural, religious and even geographical aspects. These groups get excluded from the society's established institutions and denied the means by which people have a voice in their society. The strong binaries create a number of others in our society and make

the lives horrible. The long existing deprivations prompt a sense of protest in the marginalized communities at the peak of tolerance level. The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Literature, Feminist theories and Literature, Dalit Movement, Minority Literature are some of the predominant forms of protest. The voices keep on rising from the margins and finally those voices achieve some acceptance in the hegemonic society. Literature is one of the strongest forms of protest and the marginalized groups subvert and undermine the existing elitism of dominant class. There exist a core and periphery in literature as there exist the significant presence of haves and have not in the society. The Dalits in India are one of the most humiliated social groups in the world itself. Caste discrimination and the polluting identity on Dalits may be one of the most heinous oppressions ever existed. The denial of human status, restrictions on the access to food and water, extreme level of physical and psychological harassment are the characteristics of dalithood.

Namdeo Dhasal who brims with the eagerness to agitate, follows the language of Euro-American avant-garde elements like surrealism, imagism and so on. His works challenge the nationalistic, romantic self-description of Marathi poetry with depictions of the dark world of urban squalor, explicit sexuality and despair. Despite the bleak themes, his vitality and vivacity of expression is so sublime and exquisite that he deserves to be ranked among the radical voices of protest in India. Sachin Ketkar in his essay says, “Dalit literature in general and Dhasal’s poems in particular embody the asymmetry of the core and periphery. He questions the nature of Marathi world picture and the periphery to which Dalits are relegated (90). Namdeo Dhasal is very particular in deviating from the expected ways of literature. His topics are not sweet so as the selection of words too. When he wants to represent the hard and bleak realities he chooses the vulgar and indecent words to suit the same. Such vulgar words are nothing but a fire for him which actually show the flames of social injustice to the entire world.

He focuses on unveiling and addressing the realities which are a part of Indian society but left unacknowledged as they are far from the sophisticated culture. Namdeo Dhasal uses poetry to be the weapon to fight against the savarna representations in literature by turning the themes and language upside down. Dhasal’s blistering revision and interrogation of mainstream history, not only represent the Dalits exclusively but almost all the oppressed communities who stay in the dark gutters. The hijra community, prostitutes who sell their bodies to fill the belly, the pimps, goons, beggars got depicted in the poems of Dhasal. Though not accepted in the beginning, the sufferings and the pain of these people of periphery are read by the readers and Dhasal could bring forth the social issues to the notice of the society.

Namdeo Dhasal’s first collection of poems *Golpitha* took Marathi literary circles by storm and broke all the rules of traditional Marathi literature in 1972. Dilip Chitre, a friend of Dhasal is a well-known critic and translator who took 40 years of efforts in translating Namdeo Dhasal’s poems and published the book entitled *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld*. *Golpitha* is the name of a red light area of Mumbai city notorious for all the dark sides of India. To represent such a place with its dwellers, he uses the language of the very same people. Dhasal continued to highlight such marginalized groups with all the pain and intensity in rest of his poems too. *Kamatipura* is one of the most popular and criticized poems of Dhasal. It is the largest and oldest area known for prostitution in all of Asia. Dhasal had his childhood near

Kamatipura experiencing the extreme poverty and deprivations. He saw the sorrows and sufferings of the prostitutes of Kamatipura where distinctive stench, leaky drainages, the smell of human urine, stale food and garbage, sweat, smoke and many subtler aromas pervade. He says, “This is hell. This is an ugly agony” (74). He describes Kamatipura as pain wearing dancer’s anklet, hell, ugly agony and as swirling vortex (74).

The metaphorical representation of prostitutes as porcupines can be interpreted as socially constructed body of the prostitute which resembles the body of porcupine which is not at all attractive. The expression wearing the syphilitic sores of centuries (74) depicts the extreme level of physical pain which is age old in nature. The sophisticated society believes the places like Kamatipura are the blots to the cultural society. At the same time, because of the prostitution, the women are caught by the serious diseases like HIV. The brilliant use of such hurting words highlights the intensity of sufferings. His expression reveals the hazardous condition at which the women reside. The grey colour of the porcupine can be the sign of darkness and grief in the lives of the prostitutes. This diseased and impure body of the prostitutes resembles the condition of Kamatipura which is bending in the mud of whoring. “Golpitha occupies a position equal to that of T.S.Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in Marathi but in pan-Indian poetry and it could have been written only by a Dalit. An earlier Marathi poetic classic was B.S. Mardhekar’s ‘Kahi Kavita’ that comes from a literary society much similar to Eliot’s. Dhasal’s *Golpitha* has no literary foregrounding because it springs from an ‘untouchable’ source in every sense of the term” (Chitre and Dhasal).

Along with addressing the cultural space of the homosexuals and hijras, Dhasal emphasizes the fact that the representations of dark realities will always be dark. In Sudhanva Deshpande’s words, “The more his (Dhasal’s) critics are exasperated, the more he enjoys being outrageous” (72). In some sense the poet is suggesting that the Marathi culture has become a *Gandu Bagicha*. This poem is a perfect example that contains avant-garde features. The surrealistic metaphors and comparisons of the poem make it a challenge for the existing literary model. These poems of Dhasal show the existential elements that emphasize the free and responsible agency that is inevitable in human life. The representation of homoerotic elements has high relevance though the institutionalized binaries include only man/woman and heterosexuality. The need for existence of these communities and their desires are well executed through the metaphor of *Gandu Bagicha*. *Gandu Bagicha* is a reality and so the factors discussed in the poem are also to be accepted.

Despite his social position (or perhaps because of it), Dhasal called himself a free man. After the close study of his works, One finds comfort as well as pain in realizing that Dalit poetry has sustained itself over time; comfort, because there is a record of feelings towards Dalit atrocities; pain, since these words remain equally (if not more) relevant even after all these years. Dhasal engaged in a life of dishonesty where he inhaled all kinds of substance, drank copiously, and had excessive amounts of sex – both within and (reportedly) outside of his marriage. It appears that Dhasal’s freedom transcended the physical realm. He was untouchable in a manner where his actions were questioned by many with him paying little heed to any of it.

The worldwide acceptance and acknowledgement of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry shows the success of revolutionary activism. Contradictions, complexities and agonies of all sorts are what one finds when one reads Dhasal's poetry or considers his politics. The significance of Namdeo Dhasal as a poet, thinker and politician can be grasped best by understanding his vision which insisted on opening up the veiled realities with harsh representations.

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