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**Namdeo Dhasal : *The Dalit Panther***

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Dalit literature essentially deals with the marginalised groups who are fundamentally devoid of their voice within the Indian society. It is marked by a spirit of protest and revolt and has undergone many ideological shifts in last few decades. The mainstream literature which caters to a sophisticated set of readers or perception has repeatedly shown its reluctance to publish the pain and the anguish of Dalit Literature. Hence every Dalit writer aims to carve a space or voice for himself/herself out of mainstream literature in order to bring to light the injustices meted on to his community. This inevitably creates a subculture within the mainstream literature, a kind of aperture for all the repressed Dalit sentiments which were shrugged off by insensitive society. But the power of literature is immense as it allows the existence and proliferation of dissenting voices to construct a parallel world for self- realisation and problematizes the dominant world view. Poets have constantly tried to publish their voices through literature and Namdeo Dhasal does it by impressively expressing himself in a unique way. Dhasal through his poetry projects the kinds of complicity, acquiescence and indifference shown by various quarters of society against the marginalised.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Dhasal's poetry documents all the tribulations and changes that have come in the lives of Dalits. He began writing in a period that is marked by the spirit of protest, revolt and anger against the system, and continued writing till the end. Though his political positions have been questioned and debated about time and again, this should not stop us from admiring his unmatched poetry that contributed towards bringing a revolutionary change in the whole Dalit poetic sensibilities. Speaking in a language that alternates between thoughtful musings and virulent attack on the injustices done to the Dalits, Dhasal's poetry aims to transcend and conquer all social injustices and disparities.

Even as his radical movement Dalit Panthers altered the face and form of resistance to caste, oppression and state violence, Namdeo's poetry sought to liberate language from the clutches of orthodox and sanitised usage. His collection *Golpitha*, published in 1972, the year he founded the Dalit Panther Movement, exploded like a volcano on the Indian literary scene. The poems in this collection articulated the unbridled rage of a militant caught in the vortex of a caste ridden Hindu- Society. He recognized that his country is divided into two 'nations' or 'worlds' along the lines of race and caste, respectively. Vijay Tendulkar, a well-known non- Dalit Marathi poet, delineates the distinction between the two "worlds" in the context of Dhasal's work:

*The world of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry..... begins where the frontiers of Mumbai's white- collar world ends and a no-man's land opens up. This is a world where night is reversed into the day..... of desperation against death, of the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages..... (Dhasal 10)*

Fully at home in the "loathsome and nauseating universe" of Mumbai's red light district and its stench of death and disease, he quickly understood that real honesty lay in listening to one's own inner voice. He believed that one should never write anything shrouded in obscurity and one must not indulge in "oblique poetry". Setting aside the grammar and idiom of poetic sophistication, Dhasal announced in no ambiguous terms, "I am a prisoner and a poet who goes to the heart of the matter..... I am a venereal sore in private part of language". (*A Current of Blood* 100) His seminal collection *Golpitha*, drawing on his experiences of growing up in Mumbai's red -light district, shocked the literary world, and scandalised them with its rawness and its rage. His work combined political propaganda and poetry effortlessly as he put forth an unrelenting criticism of an oppressive

system that enslaves the Dalit people. As we continue to remain a society where caste rules the roost, the explosive aggression of his words, the aesthetics of violence and street-fighting in his poetic speech, the depiction of filth in all its flamboyance, the amorality that rejected all established codes and constructs are things for which he will be remembered.

His irreverence with language also manifested itself in the manner in which he lived-outrageously lumpen. Dhasal's usage of words, tone, tenor and themes in *Golpitha*, takes us to such levels of language, that remains de-glorified and undignified. He problematizes the literariness, by not prevaricating, but bluntly venturing between the utterly degraded sense of voyeurism and the scatological surface of foulness. Albeit writing is an activity of aesthetic pleasure, *Golpitha* invariably goes against the literary aesthetics by presenting art as a depiction of a broken self. Dhasal's aesthetics is unique because it shatters the cornucopia of a civilized culture by de-glorifying it and traversing over such identities, which inevitably leave us speechless. Certain images are vulgar, pornographic but it seldom titillates the readers, rather they shock the very reading process; while those who read get involved with the dishevelled identities, and their pain, rejection and suffering incarcerates even the readers.

Generally, language is the utterance of a speaker, who engages in a conscious thought, and who is also in-turn cultured by its accompanying sophistication. Dhasal tries to infiltrate such elitist and sophisticated notions among his readership and create a shock effect. He personifies the elements of nature and charges them of being complicit in the whole debilitating caste persecutions. The elements like Sun, Moon, Water, etc. find a mention in the holy books of Hindu culture and therefore by problematizing it, he subverts the Hindu traditions, its beliefs and its conceptions and manages to de-holi-fy the casteist culture. 'Hunger' is a Dalit adjective for denial of a right to life. As Dalits had historically sacrificed their dignity at the altar of the caste based society, their bodies become objects and toys of systematic societal caste persecutions. He personifies hunger in an adversarial position in the following lines:

*Hunger, at times you assume the form of a mouse, at times you become a cat, And a lion sometimes;*

*How can we, weak ones, face*

*This game started by you and dare to play? (76)*

Another poetry, 'Sweet Baby Poverty' (ibid 87) which shows the result of a union of Dalit anguish; less a cause of celebration but more of a personification of misery and poverty. Dhasal's poetry stands as a testimony to a unique 'Dalit-ness', which stands for a self that consciously bonds and speaks for similar marginalized identities.

In "Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage", Dhasal registers his deep sympathy for the Dalit prostitute, Mandakini, who is consumed by her clients and her circumstances. While representing the pathetic circumstances of her life, he warns her not to mistake these paid sexual liaisons for love: "In the backyard of love, all you find is fruits of fear and disgust" (Dhasal 56). As Dilip Chitre notes in his Introduction to Dhasal's poetry, the Dalit prostitute functions as "the central symbol of the stigmatized and loathed.....an object of carnal 'love' but still 'loathed'" in Dhasal's work. (11). For "this object of exploitation through sexual possession, and an otherwise loathed non-person" (23), Dhasal expresses his deepest compassion:

*I've been dazzled by your worn-down and lack-luster face...*

*You make anguish scream inside me; and stream inside me; and appropriate  
me. (58)*

This profound sympathy for the most degraded humanity stirs disgust and revulsion in Dhasal's mind against the social hierarchy of caste- Hindus that conspires with urban poverty to engender such dehumanization. He concludes by drawing a similarity between Mandakini and several other women in similarly exploited circumstances:

*Never before had I seen a face so devoid of light  
As was yours; and of a thousand other females like you.  
Flashing out from so many countries, and so many cages;  
And bearing so many different names. (57)*

Similar to Dhasal's case Amiri Baraka the pioneer of Black Power Movement in US, represents the sordid life of Peaches the prostitute protagonist in his novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965) and in the process speaks for her. Although Peaches like Mandakini, may not be in a position to articulate her own condition, it is important to keep Spivak's warning in mind: the subaltern woman is always spoken for.

Dhasal's poetry evokes the angst of a Dalit's marginalised existence not in the tone of submission but in the tone of militant anger that threatens to rip apart the unjust social order. In his poem "Man, You Should Explode" he encourages his fellow Dalits to question and defy caste system and elitist politics that have subjugated a majority of the population in India. He promotes vengeful resistance against the oppressors through aggressive language:

*Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars  
One should become totally savage, ferocious, and primitive  
One should become devil-may-care and create anarchy  
Launch a campaign for not growing food, kill people all and sundry by  
Staving them to death. (10)*

Similarly Dhasal urges Mandakini to resist her oppression by identifying her as the agent of change, as a "sword, the blood dripping from the neck" and as the "living lightning, and ....the water in the bones' whose "dry-moist fingers", "Will turn the stone/Into platinum;/And will forget/untimely/ Slaughter"(60).

However he invokes these oppressed groups to create a new world where every human:

*.....must act so bright as to make the Sun and the Moon seem pale  
One should share each morsel of food with everyone else, one should  
Compose a hymn  
To humanity itself, man, man should sing only the song of man.(11)*

Another poem "Their Orthodox Pity," registers all that the Dalits are deprived of in their socio-political existence by the upper castes, the "feudal lords" (Dhasal 47). The Dalit speaker articulates how categorically his fellow people are marginalized by those who have "locked all light in their vault" and "imposed" "this lower life" on them. Rendering them completely "helpless," the higher castes do not even allow a "pavement" for the Dalits to tread on (Dalits are not permitted to walk the road used by higher caste for fear of polluting the latter). The speaker underscores the strictly demarcated existence allowed to the Dalits and laments the caste-ridden justice system that, like a:

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*Bribed person, favours only them (upper castes)*

*While we (Dalits) are being slaughtered. (47)*

In another poem, entitled "Water", Dhasal comments on how "even water is taught the caste system". The Dalits are not permitted to draw water from the wells (rural) and public taps (urban) used by higher castes even if extreme summer conditions have dried up the wells assigned to the Dalits. He highlights the lack of humanitarian feelings among the caste-conscious elites by juxtaposing the anguished plea of a thirsty Dalit:

*O Lady give me some water, give me some water O Lady*

*Pour me a trickle O Lady*

*My throat is parched.*

*O Big Brother, O village Patil,*

*O Master, O my Lord,.....*

with the cruel refusal from the upper castes:

*Away, away, you daughterfucker,*

*You fistfucker, you shithhead, you jerk,*

*You pedigreed bastard,*

*Get away, get away, you block in the way of water. (Dhasal 45-46)*

He encourages his people to demolish all institutions of political society that have only degraded the Dalits and refused to acknowledge them as fellow human beings:

*One should topple down streetlights*

*Smash up police stations and railway stations*

*One should hurl grenades; one should drop hydrogen bombs to raze*

*Literary societies, schools, colleges, hospitals, airports..... (Dhasal35)*

An angry Dhasal attempts to galvanize the Dalits to raze all religious norms that aid in dehumanization to the ground. Such institutions, should be demolished that propagate inequality among human beings. Recalling the impunity with which upper castes sexually exploit Dalit women, He instigates the Dalits to avenge their mothers', Wives', sisters' and daughters' humiliation by inflicting the same horror on the upper caste women. The violence that his works evokes connotes the aggressive and critical questioning of the hegemonic controls.

Nevertheless, while encouraging his fellow people to adopt a militant approach to their oppressors, the poet-activist pays a tribute to his ideological guru, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In "Ode to Dr. Ambedkar: 1978," Dhasal enumerates how Dalit leader challenged caste Hindu hierarchy:

*You were strong enough to uproot mighty banyan trees.*

*You raised weapons*

*Not as mercenaries do;*

*You raised them against injustice..... (Dhasal 84)*

Through this poem Dhasal not only pays tribute to Dr. Ambedkar but he also reminds his fellow –Dalits of the leader’s commitment to reviving their dignity and humanity by challenging the age old socio- cultural hegemony of caste, which is as firm and deep- rooted as the banyan tree. Along with praising Dr. Ambedkar for standing up against traditional caste discrimination, Dhasal castigates the Hindu pantheon of 33 crore gods and the commercial practice of Hinduism that mistreats Dalits as non-humans. Reducing gods to “business” he underscores the malpractices of Hindu upper caste priests, the Brahmins and questions Hinduism’s essence as a religion. All his poems on Ambedkar present him as a continuous source of enlightenment, knowledge and inspiration for the Dalits.

The poetry of Dhasal is a journey from the sacred to the profane. It can best be described as an emotive literature of untouchable people in untouchable locations reeling under untouchable situations. The imagery used is raw and direct that exhibits the victimization of Dalits with an artistic liberty of free verse. The substance and thematic richness of his poetry lifts it from vulgarity. Dilip Chitre considers Dhasal to be one of the towering poets of the twentieth century . He places him in the category of Whitman, Mayakovsky and Neruda. But unlike them, his poetry contains large chunks of a real and dirty world peopled by have-nots and their slang. Henry Miller once said, “ I am not creating values; I defecate and nourish.” According to Chitre ,Namdeo did precisely this for the Marathi Poetry. He restored its soil-cycle by feeding it the very excrement and garbage that could fertilise it for the future.

Namdeo Dhasal lived a life that cannot be contained in the polite language of obituaries, a life that revolted against hagiographies a rebellious life that shunned haloes. He will be remembered for his maverick spirit. He died on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

### REFERENCES

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