

Dalit Poetry: A Reflection of the Agony of the Marginalised

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Abstract

Dalit Poetry is the reflection of the agonised self of the marginalised strata of the society. It throws light on their miserable conditions, sufferings, pain, torture and depression in reaction to the treatment they receive from the upper caste Hindus. Dalit poets through their poems often try to question the rigid society about the discrimination and inhumane behaviour inflicted upon the Dalits. The thematic concerns of the Dalit Poetry are anguish, affliction, as well as the unjust and discriminative pressures that are haunting the lives of these ostracised people. This paper is an attempt to portray the agony of the downtrodden in the Dalit poetry. It also reflects the despair and the treatment given to them as the outcast.

Key Words: Dalit, Dalit Literature, Agony and Dalit Poetry

The word “**Dalit**” literally means “oppressed” and is used as a synonym for “Untouchable”. It also refers to casteless sections of India who are identified as the outcast. Dalits are a mixed population of various caste groups living not only all over India, South Asia but all over the world. Etymologically speaking, the word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit word “Dalita” meaning divided, split, broken or scattered. The word Dalit also means “down trodden”, “suppressed”, “crushed”, or “broken to pieces”. There are numerous diverse labels used to delineate their group such as: ‘Ash Prash’ meaning ‘Untouchables’, ‘Dalits’ meaning ‘Broken People’ ‘Pollutants’ meaning ‘Epidemic’, ‘Marginalized’ meaning ‘Insignificant’ and Mahatma Gandhi also employed the word ‘Harijans’ meaning ‘Children of God’. They are ordained to accept inferior activities such as leather work, butchering, and waste. They work as labourers cleaning streets and

latrines and are not allowed to move around in public. They were forced to live in outskirts of villages and were banned from total participation in society.

The word ‘Dalit’ was first used by Jyotirao Phule, in the 19th century and during the second half of 20th century, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar brought out a Social Revolution, which resulted in the outcome of the ‘**Dalit Literature**’. Dalit literature is a literature written by the Dalits about their lives through narratives such as poems, short stories, and, mostly autobiographies, which stood out due to their explicit representation of reality. Beena Agarwal observes that the efforts to curb the caste based differences was started much before the term ‘Dalit Literature’ was coined as she says: “the literature which was created by the sensitive and socially committed writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand, Raja Rao, Mahasweta Devi

contributed to spread consciousness in the society to protect the rights of the deprived and downtrodden sections of the society” (Agarwal Preface V). Dalit literature started being mainstream in India with the appearance of the English translations of Marathi Dalit writing. It delineates the inhibiting disposition of the caste-fanatic society which stigmatizes the ostracized community by inflicting agony, despair, and grief upon them. The caste based differences and the treatment given to the Dalits as the outcaste or the otherness distorts the fine sensibility of the human beings and gives rise to unpleasant feelings, rebellion nature, and discontent and above all it leads to destruction of the Dalits at large. Dalit Literature represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society which would be devoid of all types of caste discrimination and will enable the Dalits to lead a successful happy life which is free from all the social oppressions and exploitation at large. Jaydeep Sarangi observes “Dalit literature as a culture specific upheaval in India giving importance to Dalit realisation, aesthetics and resistance” (Thakur, 2018).

Agony is an “extreme physical or mental pain or suffering” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>). It is a synonym with suffering, pain, distress, misery. In literature it is used to show the acute physical, mental pain, anguish, the suffering, the struggle preceding death and the pile of agony to sensitise the readers towards the pathetic conditions of the Dalits.

Dalit Poetry is a form of poetry in which one finds the poets expressing the violent lashing experiences of Dalit community. Narayan Survey, Keshav Meshram, Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal and Tryambak

Sapkal were the most popular poets in the early Dalit literature. The new generation of Dalit poetry emerged in the contemporary period as a revolt or protest against the traditional oppression. We also have the Dalit folk poetry which is usually practiced for propagating Dalit sensibility among the masses. Waman Dada Kardak, Bheem Rao Kardak and Vittol Uma were the famous Dalit folk poets. The folk poetry includes ballads, which inspired the common people of Dalit community. The poets have used poetry as their weapon to be used to fight against their unending agonies. Harish Mangalam says observes:

“The feeling of dedication to the society fully flows in the Dalit poetry. The Dalit poets have continuously done the job to split the web which is the hurdle in the social uplift. Racial theme caste exploitation- in their poems is like a red color in the blood. With the social reality, poet’s self-connection is presented. So to understand and enjoy their poems the social reality of their community plus poet’s financial, cultural and social situation must be known.” (Mangalam, 142)

Dalit Poetry has been articulating against the present system with the determination of change which will confer upon the lived experiences of the Dalits and their agonised self is reflected in many of the poems written by the Dalit poets. They depict the characters that are in constant search for identity as a human being and are being reduced to subhuman creatures – socially culturally, economically and politically. Their poems are written intending to transform the narrow mindedness of the upper castes, attain identity and subside pain and suffering.

Namdev Dhasal was the famous Dalit poet has deep faith and trust in the power of verse. He has a deep concern about the existence of Dalit and, therefore, his poetry finds natural expression of his profound apprehension towards the dalits. His poems are powerful songs of rebellion as much as a theory of liberation from the mental slavery imposed by caste. He writes with a mission to fight against all forms of exploitations that tries to oppress the dalit community. Besides, Dhasal desires to abolish this world and reconstruct a new one according to his blue print because this world is full of discrimination. Though his creation is rooted in destruction still he hopes that only after the destruction there is possibility of new creation. Therefore, in the poem 'Man, You Should Explode' he says:

“After this all those who survive should stop robbing

Anyone or making others their slaves

After this they should stop calling one another names –

white or black, brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra:”

(<http://namdeodhasal.org>)

These lines have a very close depiction of the conditions of the Dalits and it also portrays the agonised self of the poet as he asks others to stop making them slaves. Dhasal is also of the belief that no man should make other men his slaves and should not exploit them by addressing them by the various labels of the castes. He tries to urge the people to stop caste discrimination and is urging them to treat both men and women equally. His poem also portrays the pain and suffering of the poor and the marginalised people.

Daya Pawar or Dagdu Maruti Pawar was an Indian Marathi language author and poet known for his contributions to Dalit literature that dealt with the atrocities experienced by the Dalits under the Hindu caste system. Pawar's writing's reflects his active contribution in the social, cultural and literary movements on the national level. His analytical and thoughtful thinking, unwavering stance, deep understanding and empathy towards social happenings and issues are his style, which he incorporates in his poems. His poems reflect the persistent suffering that comes through being a Dalit. Most of his poems are his own experience and treatment which he received for being a Dalit. The poem 'I have seen this tree tremble in pain' portrays his suffering:

I have seen this tree tremble in pain

Albeit the tree has deep roots like the Bodhi tree

The Bodhi tree at least bore flowers

This tree though is withered in all seasons

Pain trying to burst through its very pore

Leaves withered like those of a leper's fingers

What is this disease? Crutches hung on every branch

Death does not befall and so bearing the pains of death

I have seen this tree tremble in pain.

(<https://books.google.co.in>)

In the above excerpt from the poem the poet speaks about the Dalits who are symbolized as a tree which trembles in pain till death. It also compares the situation of the Dalits with the upper caste Hindus who are living a happy life. He also points out the agonized life of the Dalits and his community who are suffering like the diseased people and death also doesn't come to them. This leaves them with continued agony and leaves them with

only one option that is to bear the pains of death.

Pradnya Daya Pawar, a writer as distinguished as her father Daya Pawar, prefers to be called a poetess. She has written a play, short story collections, poetry collections, Criticism and Column Writing and in a way contributed to the Urban, Feminist and Dalit Literature. Although all of her works put us in a different sceneries and perspectives to take another look at what is happening around us. It is her poetry that voices most intensely about the agony of the Dalits. Her journey has been one of many upheavals, both in her social and personal life, and such adversities have only shaped the quality of her work so that it can stand on its own without any support. She recognizes what it means to be a Dalit woman in this country, which is reflected in the excerpt taken from her poem 'Vithabai Bhau Mang Narayangaonkar':

Oh mother! I know
The grotesque tree of agonies of a woman
Drenched in the copious amount of liquor
I know
The customary womanhood of a woman
Who had lost her password. (Pradnya Pawar 2009)

The above poem is a longish poem. It is an ode to Vithabai Bhau Mang Narayangaonkar, a noted Tamasha Artist. It also reflects the pitiful conditions of the Dalit women, where in a child says to her mother that she knows about the agonies of a woman who is drenched in pain. Further she also points out the woman's lost identity as she belongs to the marginalized group. Here the poetess tries to articulate her own agonies that she encounters belonging to the Dalit community.

Sharankumar Limbale is a famous Marathi language author, poet and literary critic. His poems rigorously scrutinized the plight of the marginalized in the society through their authentic narratives which underline the basic idea of the individualistic fervour in the hearts of the downtrodden. The poet's concerns are evident in the poem 'White Paper':

I do not ask
for the sun and moon from your sky
your farm, your land,
your high houses or your mansions
I do not ask for gods or rituals,
castes or sects
Or even for your mother, sisters, daughters.
I ask for my rights as a man.
(<http://marathiDalitpoetry.blogspot.com/>)

The poem further expounds the unfair and duplicitous milieu in which a Dalit is forced to survive in. The Dalits strive hard to experience the equality in the society by demanding their right to be treated as a human being. They are not interested in the materialistic things but only crave to experience their freedom. The Dalit doesn't demand the extravagant leisure of life but merely dreams of acquiring basic human rights. The poet rightly puts his heart's desire clear by telling the upper caste people that he is not interested in the Sun, the moon, the farms, the land, houses, mansions, Gods, rituals, castes, others mothers, sisters and daughters but is only interested in asking for his right as a man.

Ilavenil Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, fiction writer, translator and activist, who is based in Chennai. Most of her works are centered on feminism, the anti-caste, Caste Annihilation Movement of the contemporary Indian milieu. Her poems

depict the issues of caste and untouchability, identity as a woman and gender relations. Ms. Kandasamy observes that for Dalit women, oppression often means sexual subjugation. And her poems are informed by a sense of gender relations that suggest being a woman in a largely patriarchal society is another form of being lower caste. Ms. Kandasamy's woman, like female figures in a lot of feminist literature, makes unrestrained sexuality the main weapon of her social militancy. Here is a poem 'One-eyed' from that collection:

the pot sees just another noisy child
the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst
but the teacher sees a girl breaking the rule
the doctor sees a medical emergency
the school sees a potential embarrassment
the press sees a headline and a photo feature
dhanam sees a world torn in half.
her left eye, lid open but light slapped away,
the price for a taste of that touchable water.
(Ms Militancy 2010)

Kandasamy gives an example of various atrocities committed against the Dalit women in her above poem. The pot, the glass and the water sees her thirst, but the teacher, the doctor, the school, the press are indifferent to the needs of people. Human beings fail to understand their fellow-beings but the lifeless things were able to realize. Dhanam's world was "Torn in half" when she tasted the forbidden water at the cost of her left eye. This depicts the pain of the poet when she sees a girl wounded just for tasting the water and was left with only one eye.

Dalpat Chauhan is the famous Gujarati poet vividly expresses the grief of being an outcaste in his poems. The heart breaking experience of being marginalized is

reflected in the poem 'Untouchable' where the poet expresses the agony of the entire community by portraying a boy who enters the school for first time.

"The first day in school, the doom's day.
With trembling hand I did not write
One, two, three... I wrote
On the fireland of burning desert,
My chest, My caste. Since then
"I am untouchable, untouchable, you cannot touch me",

Echoed in every atom of my existence.
It was an introduction to pain caused by
hundred scorpion bites."

... O god of hate I search till day. On what
part of my body

Are written the riches of untouchability?
That's why, o giver of name untouchable,
I ask you Where is the name that you gave
me

Which has tortured me all my life?
(Chauhan, 41)

The miserable life of a child born to Dalit parent is portrayed in this poem. Not only society but also education which is the considered to be unchallengeable is also biased towards the Dalit child in the Indian society. They cannot mingle with others, cannot enjoy a normal life like other children of his age. The child instead of carrying the name as an identity carries the label of 'untouchable'. A child of a Dalit family pathetically carries with him a miserable future where right from his first day in school, he comes across the situation that makes him accept the harsh realities of the caste system in India. They are always stigmatized in the name of untouchables and the pain he feels is indescribable and thus is compared with the pain "caused by hundred scorpion bites." Towards the end of the

poem the child calls out to the almighty God to give his people dignified life and a life without any discrimination in the society.

Bapuraog Jagtap is a Marathi Poet from Maharashtra. In his poem 'This Country is Broken' attempts to highlight the roots and existence of the pitiful Dalit community who are continually overshadowed by the upper class. He adds that the upper class blindly refuses to acknowledge the existence of the Dalits in the society. This heart-wrenching misery is heightened by the poet's statement that the country celebrates these discriminative and inhumane laws made only for the benefit of the upper class society:

Brother, our screams are only an attempt
to write the chronicle of this country
— this naked country
with its heartless religion.
The people here rejoice in their black laws
and deny that we were ever born. (Dangle
37)

In the above excerpt the poet Bapuraog Jagtap points out that this country is broken as there is no equality and no freedom to the downtrodden people. They are treated as the other or the outcaste. He further says that this country is having a heartless rigid religion and most of them rejoice the black laws that are favoring the upper castes. These people don't even consider that these Dalits are even born in this country. They deny their right as man and treat Dalits with disgrace. This poem is making the people understand the agonies of the Dalits who are attempting to write the chronicle of the country.

Kisan Sosa is a famous Gujarati poet who writes poems on the marginalized group.

The themes of anguish, agony, revolt are reflected in his poems. In his poem titled 'The Inheritance', he talks of the wretched and dismal life the Dalits have inherited. He says this in the following words:

"The stale old air we have inherited
The helpless prayer, we have inherited.
As a ceiling we got rusted tin
The wall of fear we have inherited.
The back got the dried river of sweat
And the eyes had inherited the empty well.
The thirst in the corridor and in the house
hunger
The mind had inherited the desire for a silent
cry.
Where the self-esteem is wounded and
screams,
Lying in a bleeding corner, we have
inherited.
Wherein so many snakes move and move
that black box, we have inherited.
Come on, let us turn into a sun and set a fire
The night that is nightmare, we have
inherited." (Sosa, 75)

The feelings of deep agony and the inherited tormented life of the Dalits is reflected in the poem. The depressed life of a marginalized group is projected in the phrases like stale old air, rusted tin, wall of fear, dried river of sweat, empty well, in the house hunger, a silent cry, a bleeding corner and a nightmare. The Dalits have not gained fresh air to breathe, a clean house to live in, and enough food to eat. They are deprived of the basic needs and the fresh air to breathe. They don't hold any recognition in the society as they are often insignificant to the upper class Hindus. They have lived a life full of physical degradation, insults, social humiliation and personal embarrassment. The poet says that their self-esteem is

wounded by doing the menial jobs and slogging day and night under the discriminating society.

Conclusion

Thus Dalit poetry can be perceived as a creation of new consciousness. It breaks new grounds in terms of experience, sensibility and expression that pave way for peaceful and dignified life of the marginalized. Dalit poetry is born out of a social situation, social compulsion and of individual creative impulses. The poems not only are painful but also provide the readers with a traumatic experience and thus present a vision of love and humanity in society.

Thus, it is rightly pointed out that “Dalit poetry is not merely a medium for the expression of rebellion. Its aim is to pierce through the several worldly screens and give birth to a truth which is different and new” (Mangalam 198). According to Dr. Ambedkar, caste is the monster which crosses our path wherever we go to. In Annihilation of Caste, he puts forward his argument in the following way:

“This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform; you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster”. (Ambedkar, 31)

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