

Namdeo Dhasal: A Poet of the Underworld

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ABSTRACT: Namdeo Dhasal is arguably one of the most prominent Indian poets of the 20th century. Born on February 15, 1949 in the untouchable Mahar family, Dhasal became the only Dalit poet whose poetry fetched him both, the Padma Shri in 1999 and a Lifetime Achievement award from our country's apex literary institution Sahitya Akademi in 2004. Dhasal is a potent voice of Dalit revolt who finds a very close relation between literature and politics. He fractured the Marathi literary world which had always been dominated by the upper-class writers. All his nine books of poetry speaks for the oppressed, is addressed to the oppressed and represents their oppression. His poetry deals with the people, the society, the professions existing on the thresholds of the so called 'pious and decent' world. His poetry, the words he uses and the manner in which he uses them have so much reality, rage, power and strength in them that they can serve as the new anthem for the Dalit youth. This paper presents a glimpse of the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, keeping in forefront the 'Dalit-ness' that one encounters as one travels through his works.

Keywords: Dalit, class struggle, exploitation, revolt.

Date of Submission: 01-09-2017

Date of acceptance: 23-09-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

A Dalit identity is the identity of a person uprooted several times in a single lifetime. He or she is the constantly degraded human being, and a weak and struggling member of a community of the underworld, the deprived. Being a Dalit in our country is not a burden easy to carry; and to shed this burden and shine bright like a star, to have an established identity and to have a voice that could be heard requires a lot of strength and will power.

This superhuman strength and power is exemplified in the life of Namdeo Laxman Dhasal. He spent his childhood as a Mahar in a small village Pur in Khed taluk near Pune, India. To earn a better living he shifted with his family to Mumbai.

Uprooted from the countryside and then replanted in the inner rotten core of Mumbai—"a city of the most extreme and dehumanizing forms of exploitation" (Dilip Chitre) Namdeo's humanity and inner struggle proved triumphant. He, in fact, drew nourishment from this toxic waste and grew up to become the 'poet of the underworld, a lumpen messiah, and a poor man's voice'. In Mumbai being a dalit he felt alienated, dejected and torn when he says,

*"This soil treated me as an outsider;
This air turned its back on me;
What took pity on me in the end was the sky
that has no limits".*

Playwright Vijay Tendulkar summed Dhasal's poetry very perfectly-

"The world of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry – the world known as 'Golpitha' in the city of Mumbai – begins where the frontier of Mumbai's white-collar world ends and no-man's land opens up. This is a world where the night is reversed into the day, where stomachs are empty or half empty, of depression, against death or the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewerages, of diseased young bodies lying in the gutters braving the cold by holding their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighborhood tough guys and pimps....."

The poetry of Dhasal, starting from the late 1960s, documents all the tribulations and changes that came in the lives of the Dalits. He began writing in a period that was marked by multiple revolts, protests and anger against the system as a whole and he continued writing till the end. His works were all aimed to attack the social

injustices and differences. Reading his poetry one feels that it not only belongs to the period of 1970s and 1980s, rather it is equally important today. According to Dilip Chitre,

“The dalit and the lumpen became Namdeo’s central preoccupation as a creative writer, a political thinker and an activist”.

Dhasal had always longed for an equal world. Once writing a piece of poetry, he said-

***“While I write this at night
it’s three o’ clock
Though I want to have a drink
I don’t feel like drinking.
Only I want to sleep peacefully
And tomorrow morning see no varnas”***

For Dhasal poetry was a form of weapon that he used in his class struggle. For him writing poetry was akin to bring about a political and social change in the society. He used words as though they were real bullets and said that these bullets were not to be wasted like shots from a toy gun. He was fully aware of what he is saying when he wrote these lines in his poem “Cruelty”:

***“I am the venereal sore in the private part of language,
The living spirit looking out
Of hundreds of thousands of sad, pitiful eyes
Has shaken me.
I am broken by the revolt exploding inside me”***

Dhasal always stood for what he said, he had no concern for the kind of language he uses until and unless it served his purpose. A critic Robert Bohm rightly said:

“Dhasal of course makes no apologies for his writing. Instead, he’s relentless in his insistence, the reader know why he writes the way he does. And so he regales us with the real, detailing a claustrophobic world filled with extraordinary deprivation and garbage that is both literal and spiritual.”

In his poem “Man, You Should Explode” he said,

***“Man, you should drink human blood, eat
Spit roast human flesh, melt human fat
And drink it,
Smash the bones of your critics....”***

It took a lot of time to feel the pain and anguish behind his words.

In the Indian society there has always been a constant negotiation between the elite upper class and the lower caste for most of the necessary things be it language, education, and this happens even when it comes to sharing and consumption of water. Dhasal once said,

***“Upstream, the water is all for you to take
Downstream, the water is for us to get”.***

‘Water’ here stands as a metaphor for hygiene, purity, satisfaction which was made available only according to the fancies of the upper class. This also presents the hegemonic imposition of the rule of one upper class everywhere. Similarly ‘Hunger’ is another 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 have become objects and toys of systematic societal caste persecutions. Dhasal 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 it?”***

In his poem “Man, You Should Explode” he throws in wind the elite notions of culture, tradition and civilization and creates a new society that rejects distinctions of ‘white or black, Brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra’ and sings for the whole humanity. He asks the oppressed sections to create chaos and anarchy by smashing the existing biased systems of the elite.

***“Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars,
Party wars, crusades, world wars
One should become totally savage, ferocious, and
primitive
One should become evil-may-care and create
anarchy
Launch a campaign for not growing food, kill people
all and sundry by
Starving to death”***

Dhasal sets the sophisticated poetic decorum to fire by indulging to a greater extent on vulgar descriptions. In “Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended College” Dhasal pictures the ultimate marginalized identity- a prostitute who is shown to be an object for sexual perversion by men.

***“Her clothes ripped off, her thigh blasted open,
A sixteen-year-old girl surrendering herself to pain,
And a pig: its snout full of blood”.***

The poem paints the worst that happens in such places. The violence and the brutal force with which the young women’s virginity and chastity is violated do not belong exclusively to this place. It often comes from the outside world, which is a ‘virtuous’ world in the broad daylight, a world that is in reality darker and hollow than these places. The title of one of the poems “Kamatipura” suggests the location of Kamatipura in Bombay which according to Susan Dewey is, “the biggest and the oldest area dedicated to prostitution in all of Asia” (Dewey). The poem is divided into seven stanzas and it depicts the dark and hideous world of Kamatipura as the speaker says, “This is hell. This is an ugly agony”. Using the metaphor of a porcupine, the poem brings to light the plight of prostitutes. The deceased bodies of prostitutes are like “potassium cyanide” baring the “pain of whoring” and waiting for “lotus to bloom”.

Pain, anguish, poverty, deprivation, starvation, loneliness, hellish life of men, women, children and almost all the marginalized sections of our society have been captured accurately in the poetry of Dhasal. The predicament of a Dalit woman and her exploitation is mirrored in a sarcastic way:

***“Women are merely printed whores of men.
Men are just pimps of women.
The relationship of men and women is just like-
Take a few whores; take a few pimps; take a few chewing stick to clean
the teeth;
And throw them away after use; and then gargle with the holy water the
river.”***

All the poems written by Dhasal have a unique ‘Dalit-ness’ if one may say, which stands for a self that constantly fights and speaks for similar marginalized identities. This ‘Dalit-ness’ stands not only for the class of oppressed Dalits but also each and every person who has been denied his right to live as others, live the life of his choice. It is very interesting to see how Dhasal also personifies the elements of nature and blames them for being a participant in the whole game of suppression of the weak. He even manages to de-holi-fy the castiest culture by blaming elements like Sun, Moon, Water and Air, which find a mention in the holy books of Hindu culture. Dilip Chitre rightly pointed out:

“Namdeo’s universe is untouchable too. It is loathsome and nauseating universe, a journey from the sacred into the profane.....from the clean to the dirty, from the sanitized to the unsanitary, from the healthy to the diseased”.

For Dhasal there is no difference, between poetry and activism and his poetry is only the literary form of his activism.

As a quintessential Dalit feature, Dhasal engages himself in the idealization and idolization of Dr. Ambedkar in his poems 'Ode to Dr. Ambedkar' and 'Ode to Ambedkar: 1978'. Here Dr. Ambedkar is presented as the sun of the oppressed, a metaphor of enlightenment, knowledge and inspiration. By acknowledging the need of a revolt Dhasal takes upon himself the duty to carry forward the legacy of Ambedkar but in a new manner:

*"My history starts from you, the age of everyman you launched
.....my society is just a bystander;
If I don't uproot this society of mere onlookers,
A hard rock will separate you and me".*

The poet not only sketches out the saga of oppression and exploitation of the dalits but also tries to find its roots from within the society in poems "The Tree of Violence":

*"Finally the roots of the tree were found
In the Havelis of the Zamindars and in their
Mehfils
Finally the roots of the tree were found
monopolists
Finally the roots of the tree were found
Under the throne of the Empress"*

According to an eminent Marathi writer Vyankatesh Madgulkar:

"If I have to name one poet, whose poetry carried that odor/smell/stench of pain, humiliation, suffering, agony, anguish and the anger, raw courage, desire and commitment to destroy the system which created this and everything related to it for unification of humanity, I will name Namdev Dhasal".

During a general talk with Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni, who served as an aid to former Indian Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee between 1998 and 2004, Dhasal gave a very significant advise to the educated Dalit youth. He said:

"For many years, we in the Dalit movement had been agitating over issues of emotive nature. But we did not pay enough attention to business and commerce. India's economic and social realities are now changing rapidly. Educated Dalit youth should not look only for government jobs. They should come forward, and prove their mettle by seizing the new opportunities being created by India's growing economy."

In the poem "Worry'" Dhasal is worried about future and remains indifferent to immortality and spirituality:

*"I do not wish to get chained to this God-created hell
For me every day brings a smile to the lips of fortune
Whether the ambrosial cloud rains immortality or not
I don't wish to entomb myself here in a trance
As for me I still have to worry
About tomorrow's bread"*

He was a fearless fighter who was bold enough to face death:

*"Death is a better alternative to fear
Rather than get buggered; butcher them back
Then bring them back to life, and then kill them again
I too would like to be martyred
For my people's sake"*

II. CONCLUSION

Dhasal's poetry has been criticized from time to time severely by critics but he takes delight in shaking the composed and stirring up the controversies. Sudhanva Deshpande says aright:

“The more his (Dhasal’s) critics are exasperated, the more he enjoys being outrageous.”

Dhasal supports it and says:

“I have been criticized by many. Whenever I find the time, I read what my critics write. However it does-not affect me.”

Even for a reader who is far away from the dalit struggle, shivers with awe reading the raw poetry of Dhasal. Though he has been less acknowledged than deserved his poetry still counts among the best works of literature for those who have entirely read him. No matter when he wrote his poetry, it will always have an appeal to each one who has been suppressed at any point of time in his life. This radical Dalit poet Namdeo Laxman Dhasal, who moved generations through provocative prose and poetry on the plight of the deprived sections of society, died after a long battle with colorectal cancer on 15 January, 2014.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Swati Suri. “Namdeo Dhasal: A Poet of the Underworld.” IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) , vol. 22, no. 9, 2017, pp. 90–94.