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ARTICULATING ANGER: A PERSPECTIVE ON NAMDEO DHASAL'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to explore the manner in which Namdeo Dhasal uses anger constructively as a literary innovation to articulate the silent rage of dalits who have been relegated to the bottom of social hierarchies since thirty centuries. In Dhasal's poetry, one observes the startling possibility of anger as a mode of organizing and articulating emotional energy. The paper will further explore how Dhasal deliberately uses the subversive diction to challenge the elitist upper caste notions of decorum and balance.

Keywords: activism, anger, caste, dalit, protest, subversive diction

Indian poetry today is no longer monolithic: it is more polyphonic than ever before, perhaps because of a break-down of unifying concerns, and homogenizing ideologies like Bhakti in the medieval period or National Independence in the first half of 20th century. This destruction of a central voice has made poetry more various and democratic, capable of reflecting upon the subtle nuances of the complex experience of oppressed communities. The destiny of a dissenter poet is always threatened in a consumerist society that translates communal needs into acts of individual acquisition which dismisses even the remotest dreams of an egalitarian society as absurd flights of fancy, suspects' collective identities for their subversive potential and at the same time turns individuals into manufactured, merchandised personalities. Totalitarian systems of the Nazi, Stalinist, or religious—fundamentalist variety banish the dissenting artist into prisons, concentration camps and lunatic asylums or pass death-sentences on them. Market societies have subtler mechanisms: they try to absorb and contain the artist, turning him/her into a fetish and his/her art into just another commodity. They permit even a kind of opposition as long as it is marketable. Only they fear any form of the collectivisation of dissent, the formation of imagined artistic communities that might prove fatal to their philistine interests. Dalit poets try to resist the commodification of the individual by a dynamic assertion that articulates the silent pain and rage of a section of Indian population relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy for more than thirty centuries.

The superstructures of caste in India deform, and complicate the identities of the dalits along lines of gender, class, and family structure. The upper-caste national elitists exercise domestic colonialism by exploiting the dalit women and emasculating the men. Dalits through resistance movements attempt to realize their national identities guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

'Dalit Literature' is a very conflicted idea. It is not a single cohesive literary movement with its own literary ideology. Anything published by a Dalit writer is considered Dalit literature. Alternatively, anything that reveals the life of the Dalit or any aspect of it is regarded as Dalit literature. The average Dalit in India is still illiterate and socially immobilized. This is a gap that is seen between the Indian elite and the majority of

Indians, but it becomes an even wider gulf when the Dalit elite is juxtaposed with the average Dalit. The audience of all Dalit literature is predominantly non-Dalit. Dalit writing today is extremely varied. Apart from the realistic, non-realistic, naturalistic and quasi-journalistic fiction that constitutes the staple of Dalit prose writers, there are surrealist and expressionist poets among the Dalit whose writing is extremely sophisticated or avant-garde. The Dalit poets like Namdeo Dhasal and Aijun Dangle have created an alternative poetics that throws overboard classical values like propriety, balance, restraint and understatement. They also often use a deliberately subversive diction that challenges middle class notions of decency.

Namdeo Dhasal co-founded the Dalit Panther in 1972 as a militant activist dalit organization and it was his political agenda to brutalize upper caste sensibility through vehement opposition. Dilip Chitre notes that the "purpose of the Dalit Panther was to bring young dalit men and women together and organize continuous action and protest against the oppression of dalits in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India" (Dhasal 13). Evading several attempts of assassination, Dhasal nevertheless suffered serious injuries at several points in his Panther career. In 1975, the Congress, the Shiv Sena and the Republican Party regarded Dalit Panther as their prime enemy, and the Dalit Panther's moving spirit Namdeo Dhasal was their prime target. However, Dhasal continued his political activism through organizations and through his political writing, namely poetry. Chitre writes: "...Namdeo is a born activist and Dalit Panther his *raison d'être*, as much as poetry is the life of his spirit. Namdeo cannot separate his activism from his poetry, and his poetry is only the literary form of his activism" (Dhasal 15). In recognition of his irrepressible talent, Dhasal became the recipient of the only Lifetime Achievement Award to be given by India's national academy of letters – the Sahitya Akademi – at its golden jubilee in 2004.

Dhasal employs hyper-masculine and aggressive imagery to represent his fellow subalterns' repressed rage and to inspire them of the urgency to assume control of their lives and dignity. The forceful wresting of control from the supremacists' grip translates into violent imagery in his works. The most accessible part of his poems is their rhetorical and didactic stanzas where Dhasal is either venting the venom of his anarchistic wish 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 undercaste 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 34).

But what he does is not simple. Although the emotions expressed are all negative, each poem consists of an interaction among a variety of negative emotions. Dhasal communicates an angry energy even when he is depicting pain or anguish. And his anger is something Shakespearean and multi-dimensional. It can be blind rage and murderous fury. But it also is sarcastic, tragic, witty, absurd, and self-conscious by turns. In other words, it has a style of its own which not only systematizes and integrates it but demands to be studied as literary innovation.

He chooses female as the mascot for representing the downgraded and the stigmatized among humankind. He thinks that prostitutes suffer permanently and, hence, they become his "ultimate symbol of human degradation—an object of exploitation through sexual possession, and an otherwise loathed non person, left to living decay after use" (Dhasal 23). He voices their yearnings, pain and suffering in 'Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage'. The poem begins and ends with the same symbolic quatrain. I quote: "On a barren blue canvas her clothes ripped off/ her thigh blasted open/ A sixteen-year old girl surrendering herself to pain/ And a pig: it's snout full of blood" (Dhasal 56).

Here again, his anger subverts romantic love poetry as well as the effect of highly organized and disciplined subjective poetry themed on erotic or emotional love. 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. In 'Man, you should explode', he expresses his anger saying that "one should tear off all the pages of all the sacred books in the world/ And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses" (Dhasal

35). As he wishes to raise hell all over the place, he asks man to "drink human blood, eat spit roast human flesh, melt human fat and drink it" and strongly favours to "Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars" (Dhasal 35). He does not mind if one becomes totally savage and irresponsible and, hence, contributes in creating anarchy. Following are the quoted lines where he advocates for the total destruction: "Kill oneself too, let disease thrive/ make all trees leafless /Take care that no bird ever sings,/ man, one should plan to die groaning and screaming in pain/ Let all this grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up/ And burst at a nameless time to shrink" (Dhasal 36).

Dhasal's approach is not wholly negative. What he wants is creation according to his plan that does not discriminate between people. He avoids renovating the present building of the society; rather he favours its destruction so that a new building could be constructed according to the egalitarian blue print which he wishes to translate into action. Mark the positive vision of creation after destruction: "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" (Dhasal 36).

Dhasal's concept of Dalit is panoptic. Dilip Chitre writes in this connection: "His definition of Dalit embraces all people discarded by society as useless to its organization. This takes the term dalit beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of the Indian Constitution. It means socioeconomically ostracized people, and India has hundreds of millions of them" (Dhasal 20). As he considers himself to be one of the 'lumpenproletariat—scum of the earth', he talks of prostitutes, pimps, criminals, street urchins, sexually transmitted diseases, gangsters, etc. who colour the canvas of his poetry.

What we observe in Dhasal's poetry is the startling possibility of anger as a mode of organizing and articulating emotional energy. It is an astounding paradox because while all poetry of protest is basically angry, very few poems of protest are successful. The anger is used for destroying communication altogether by distorting language beyond retrieval or for creating a loud, hollow and increasingly mechanical rhetoric which is tiresome and insignificant. The only difference is that Dhasal is perhaps the only poet among many poets of protest in contemporary India who speaks of the underworld as an insider and a social and political prophet. Again, he speaks in the many voices of the underworld rather than as an individual bourgeois tourist. He is not speaking of a personal and romantic disaster but of a massive malignancy which he finds eating away a whole civilization. The anger articulated in his poems rises to the level of architecture because it both systematizes disparate images from an authentic world hitherto invisible in literature and uses the energy of anger to encompass a whole range of negative feelings and positive visions.

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