



Revelry, Release, & Revolution: An Insight into Namdeo Dhasal's Selected Works

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Abstract:

Voices from the margins are reduced to muffled screams, drowned out by the din of mainstream discourse. Growing louder often results in more systematised and deliberate effort to mute them. Rioting against this and practicing his politics of resistance through poetry, Namdeo Dhasal wrote “unsanitary” poems that marked the very

essence of being a liminal figure in Indian social and political life – a Dalit. His writing encapsulates this liminality by depicting the peculiarity of the Dalit's position on the cusp of Indian society, i.e., both within it and outside it. The following comment beseeches readers to re-orient themselves and reconsider pre-existing dichotomies – of inside/outside, beauty/ugliness, and poetry/politics. This exercise becomes important for the poetics of life as well as the poetics of politics, enabling newer languages and manifestations of art to present themselves. The comment ends by considering Dhasal's controversial personal life as a husband – asking the oft-dreaded question of severing the artist from his art.

Keywords: Poetry review, marginalised voices, unconventional poetry, caste politics, Dalit aesthetics.

Poetry in Play: Introducing the Dalit Poet

*“Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it.
And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have
to go back into it.”¹*

(Bachelard)

Bachelard's quote on the poetics of the inside-outside dichotomy encapsulates the conundrum in finding a space for the Dalit in Indian society. The Dalit is constantly trying to escape her identity as one, while simultaneously choosing to wear that skin until she can voluntarily shed it off. The paradox becomes about reclamation to eventual elimination. I read Dhasal closely to shock commonsensical notions of what writing entails and *who* the poet can be. In the following review, I try to understand how poetry served as a release for Dhasal and for Dalits generally.

¹ Bachelard, Gaston (1969): *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Dhasal's poetry is penetrative. I mean this, remaining true to his poetics, in the way the word is meant to be used. His poetry pierces through and ruptures, leaving a stain on all that it touches.² Each word is more than an ejaculation of sorrow and subjugation; it is the shrill scream of a whore on a rainy monsoon evening in Bombay that roughly translates to knowing better about their plight, wanting something more/different from the world, but accepting and reclaiming the space that they inhabit in the present. Senses cannot guarantee sensibilities. Most readers or writers of poetry in Dhasal's time and well after, belonging to upper echelons of society, focus(ed) their writings on the independence struggle, death, and the beauty of freedom. There was little about the dirt (read: shit) on the road that quite piqued their interests. This sensibility is bred out of these harsh realities. In fact, we may very well say that they are bred *inside* them. (Rao) A taxi driver hailed for leading an immoral life, Dhasal wrote poetry on the side and eventually grew in prominence for his ties with the Dalit Panthers movement. (Rao 2017) He has reclaimed the fullest sense of the word "*untouchable*"; *untouchable* because he is relegated to the outside, *untouchable* because he is polluted, and *untouchable* because our senses will fail us once again when we try to reach for him without being able to fully grasp everything he said.

Deconstructing Beauty

Dalit poetry focuses little on *Soundarya*³, nature, and love as conventionally articulated in poetry. Dalit politics and poetics are inextricably linked. Dalit poetry, almost always, has been bred out of their politics (or the lack thereof). The kind of beauty that Dhasal's poetry alludes to can be likened to Jibananda Das' on

² This is an allusion to his poem "Speculations on a Shirt" from the Gandu Bagicha collection.

³ Roughly translates to "beauty".

certain occasions.⁴ (Gupta) Das' ability to garner reproach from the likes of Rabindranath Tagore can be likened to the feeling that the entirety of Dalit literature (perhaps Dalits generally) evokes. Traversing modern Indian poetry, we may realise a thing or two. The first lesson is on the ephemeral idea of beauty. I learned that beauty also resides in its absence. In "*Arsefuckers Park/ Gandu Bagicha*", Dhasal brings us a world belonging to miscreants. Beauty, here, lies in honesty, the vividness of detail, and in unchaste articulation. The second lesson is on vision. I am tempted to wonder whether "*flâneur*" – a word critics have used to describe Arun Kolatkar, Nissim Ezekiel, and Adil Jussawalla (among many others) – then becomes a bourgeois idea of someone who simply opens her eyes. Seeing is something that those who are compelled to remain silent and watch from the sidelines do almost automatically. Seeing is an art, while the sight might not always be.

*"The only rule I followed
was not to miss in my writing any of the subtleties and nuance
of the life I lived..."*

Namdeo Dhasal.

Dhasal writes that *Golpitha* was "an observation". (Chitre, Namdeo on Namdeo) The most vivid depiction of his 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, carve 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-sanitised 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.

⁴ See J. Das, 'One Day Eight Years Ago', where he writes about the corpse of a man lying in a morgue.

(Chitre, Namdeo on Namdeo) 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. The poem presented itself to me as an articulated scream. 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*”. How artfully he instilled that same turmoil within us.

Poetry in (e)motion

“Then I threw all rulebooks out... My poetry was as free as I was... I went on writing, unshackled and liberated.”

Namdeo on Namdeo.

Dhasal grew up reading poetry and mastering meters and rhyming schemes when he was barely a teenager – an image that exceeds our imagination. (Chitre, *A Current of Blood*) We are never told these prodigal stories of people like Dhasal. The Dalit is forbidden from this coveted space of glory. Her achievements are anomalies – exceptions to the general rule of subordination. This is where poetry has been instrumental in their struggle from and comfort with their identity. Dhasal writes about the impact that Marathi poetry had in his life. (Chitre, *A Current of Blood*) It was through these works that he was inspired to write...and write he did.

The paper heard of struggles that nobody else lent an ear to. Despite his social position (or perhaps because of it), Dhasal called himself a free man. I find 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 debauchery 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. Dare I say it, and pardon my French, but Dhasal proved himself to be *unfuckable*.

Accounts from his wife and poet, Malika Amar Shaikh, introduce us to another side of Dhasal – of violence that remained off the page. (Shaikh) Can/Should we discount this aspect and read his work separately? Dhasal was an imperfect – possibly violent – man. His quest for freedom left him constantly hungry (a word he dwells on particularly), garnering the respect of the world but losing it from those most dear to him. He was another human being and his poetry created waves where ripples, too, were once forbidden, and that becomes instrumental for his time. We must note that his work was bred inside and out of violence. In conclusion, then, his is yet another instance of how a victim of history often becomes a perpetrator of another kind of violence.

References

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