

AN ETERNAL SAGA OF DISILLUSIONED DREAMS: POVERTY, PAIN AND PROTEST IN DALIT POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Dalit poetry represents the anguish, ache and agony of the oppressed class. Dalit poets have earnestly raised various issues focusing the helplessness and misery of their class. Being the targets of the so called upper class, they suffer miserably at every stage of life irrespective of gender. Being placed at the margins of the society they are left out of every important social, economic and cultural activity. Poetry gives an expression to intense emotional feelings of an individual. The growing corpus of Dalit poetry voices the feelings and ideas of the voiceless. The discrimination, humiliation, brutality, poverty, protest, hunger and other such issues find dominant place in Dalit poetry. The wretched situation experienced and suffered by them is projected through the poems. The hypocrisy, treachery of the orthodox society is also a subject reflected through the poems. The negation of the societal, economic, religious, cultural and even personal right makes them protest against the predominant system. The most well-known, just to name a few Dalit poets are Namdeo Dhasal, Narayan Surve, Keshav Meshram, Arjun Dangle, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Mina Gajbhiye and Jyoti Lanjewar.

*The present paper is an attempt to explore the dimensions in the lives of Dalits. The suffering, humiliation, injustice, cruelty and heinous treatment meted out to them by the upper-class leaves them devastated. The selected poems from *The Poisoned Bread* (1992) reveals the very sensitive issues related to the personal, social and economic lives of the Dalits. The poems expose the pathetic situation of the downtrodden right from birth to death.*

Key Words: *Dalit poetry, oppressed class, humiliation, injustice, cruelty*

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The Dalits were denied the basic rights in the society and the meaningless of their life made them ponder over very important social, political, cultural and personal issues. L.S.Rokade has skillfully dealt with a sensitive issue in "To be or Not to be Born", in the hypocrite and orthodox society which dehumanizes the downtrodden. The poet speculates over the painful and laborious life of his mother and wonders whether he should really take birth in the vulnerable society full of heinous people waiting to capture the lives of the poor, exploiting them. He grieves over the reality that the Dalits are barred from all the paths of success and light. All the paths leading to the horizons are banned for them. Sky is the only support and roof over the heads of the poor who lie under it waiting for a miracle and hoping that there is a prop. They have no blankets to cover their tired bodies because of the dire and abject poverty they survive in amongst the so called upper class community. Their heads are constantly and daily supported by pillow of needs and wants. The helplessness of the mother can be clearly seen in the lines when the poet says that the during day time they wither with empty fists tied to the breast. Not only personal but social agony is portrayed by the poet when the Dalits have to beg and plead for palmful of water when rivers and lakes overflow. The poet's antagonism can be sensed through his powerful words when he writes, "I spit on this great civilization." The question remains unanswered and the confusion and chaos remains in the mind of the poet when he says:

I spit on this great civilization
Is this land yours, mother,
Because you were born here?
Is it mine
Because I was born to you?
Must I call this great land mine
love it
sing its glory?
Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
I must confess I wondered
Should I be born
Should I be born into this land?¹

The poet hates this land of inequality, injustice and discrimination. Nature too, he feels is cruel to them as the rivers and the sky only give hopes. Their dream of being a part of the human civilization never comes into reality. Silent protest against the system is felt in his poem. The same anger and grudge is felt in Jyoti Lanjewar's poem, "Caves." The suffering of the voiceless gets its own voice when the atrocities grow beyond the limit. The outcome of the violence and inhuman treatment meted out to them is seen in the form of protest. The unbearable pain, mute suffering, utter helplessness, sorrow, mental and emotional traumas are responsible for the outburst. Being denied the basic rights calls for revolt against the dominating system. Lanjewar's poem reflects the anger at being neglected and denied the very human right both by man and nature. The inhuman treatment given to the downtrodden gives birth to emotional traumas, physical sufferings, cultural conflicts and social unrest amongst them. The poet has deftly mentioned in her poem the pathetic condition of the poor and the underdogs:

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart
I must tread this forest with wary steps
eyes fixed on the changing times
The tables have turned now
Protests spark
now here
now there.
I have been silent all these days
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
for human rights.
How did we ever get to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us even
the life of cats and dogs?
I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
and turn, here and now,
a rebel. (22)

A rebellion against the existing humiliating system is a feature of Dalit poetry. The poets try to bring social consciousness in the society against the domination, humiliation, exploitation, suffering, discrimination, and negation. Human freedom is the main aim of Dalit literature. The oppressed class got its voice noticed through literature, particularly poetry. Degradation of human beings at the hands of the owners, landlords and the aristocrat was a common scenario

in the past. The dire poverty made the poor mere puppets in the hands of the so called upper-class. Struggling to meet the needs from hand to mouth, for survival made the poor do anything and cross any limits of pain and agony. Exploitation, slavery and humiliation are seen through Bhimsen Dethe's poem, "Song" in which he aptly describes the condition of a labourer being exploited at the hands of the owner. Being helpless the poor man has to sing and dance and get ridiculed at the hands of his employer. The helplessness and misery is vividly portrayed in the poem. Poverty is the root cause of every suffering. The headman at the workplace can be cruel to an extent of treating the workers as puppets in their hands. Dethe has skillfully sketched the helplessness of a father who dances to the tunes of the boss to feed his hungry children:

As father carried upon his head,
the headman, twirling his moustaches, used to say, 'Hey Kisnya'
let's have a first-rate lavni!
and my father would sing with his tattooed throat:
In his song
there was the moon, and the sun,
and flowers blossoming, sea-waves,
an impassioned girl drunk with love..

Sweat- stained hands clapped;
there was applause all round.
My father was touched, was filled with gratitude.
Walking home he groped towards the song of bread
that he never could sing. (7)

The pitiable condition of the father can be vividly seen through the fact that he already carries the burden of his familial responsibilities and also of the heavy stone of inequality, discrimination and torture the society has placed on his head. The father in the poem romanticizes nature as beautiful and blossoming but in his real life there is neither joy nor happiness, the life he sings about, the sea-waves he describes in his song are missing in his real life. In reality his life is dry, full of dire poverty, miserable and hard. There is no passionate love in his life as there are more worries than peaceful moments. Hardships of life are unending for the poor. They have no desire and fancies except satisfying the basic needs. For the poor, life is like a desert without Oasis. The mother's condition is equally dreadful as she has to undergo pain and torture of society, nature and poverty. The mother silently suffers emotional and physical anguish. Hungry children eagerly waiting for her return sometimes do not get food as her firewood is not sold. The wretched condition of the poor mother is touchy. Waman Nimbalkar's, "Mother" exposes the dire poverty and the vulnerability of the mother. The 'black

snake' of poverty, sexual exploitation and physical pain kills the mother in the poem leaving her kids with no support for survival. The impact of the tragic death of the mother leaves the child in mental trauma and emotional conflict. Hunger is another aspect the poet has brought to limelight. Just to fill the four inch of gap in the stomach, man has to pay a heavy price sometimes and so the mother has to. Darkness occupies the lives of the poor and needy. It never illuminates into joy or satisfaction. The darkness within the stomach, within their lives and mind can never be removed:

Daylight would die. Darkness would reign.
We at out hut's door. No single light inside.
Lights burning in houses around.
Kitchen- fires too. *Bhakris* beaten out.
Vegetables, gruels cooked.
In our nostrils, the smell of food. In our stomachs, darkness.
From our eyes, welling up, streams of tears.
Slicing darkness, a shadow heavily draws near.
On her head, a burden. Her legs a-totter.
Thin, dark of body...my mother.
All day she combs the forest for firewood.
We await her return.
When she brings no firewood to sell we go to bed hungry...(36)

In the concrete jungle of heinous people the mother tries to find some comfort and livelihood but she fails drastically and has to lose her life. While combing the morally, socially and culturally mutilated forest she is bit by a poisonous snake and succumbs to the piosonour sting. The society does not pity her nor her kids who are 'thrown to the wind' after her death. The vindictiveness of the man-made society is seen in the poem. The grief struck people are aware that not only the society but also the country is broken. The country is broken and divided into pieces according to the class, caste, religion etc. The agony of the split Nation according to various aspects is seen in Bapurao Jagtap's poem, "This Country is Broken." Jagtap presents in his poem his views on how a country is in a bad state because of the division it has made amongst people residing in cities, their religion and their castes. The Dalits protest against the discrimination and do not accept the life in the broken country, with broken people. The negligence towards the downtrodden, the fragmented identities they share and the suffering they undergo is an issue of great concern. The heartless religion is a barrier in the progress of the society. Caste, class and religion have divided the country in parts which can never be united. Dalits are aware that their voices are never heard and they are ill treated and neglected. They search for a new country where they can have a roof on their heads and at least a piece of land to be buried after death. The poem is a protest against the system that breaks the country in part. He writes:

This country is broken into a thousand pieces;
Its cities, its religion, its castes,
Its people, and even the minds of the people
- all are broken, fragmented.
In this country, each day burns
Scorching each moment of our lives.
We bear it all, and stand solid as hills
in this our life
that we do not accept.
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
we were ever born.
Let us go to some country, brother,
Where, while you live, you will have
A roof above your head,
And where, when you die, there will at least be
A cemetery to receive you. (37)

The relentless struggle and protest against the brutalities, injustice and hypocrisy finds an expression in a very realistic and down to earth attitude in the poems. The Dalits subjected to the evils of the society raise their voice in protest in various forms. The harsh social reality is portrayed by the poets in their poems. The turmoil gives birth to restlessness, agony, and protest as well. Bhau Panchbhai's anger and lack of trust in the society can be seen through his poem, "How?." He is restless as he cannot trust the system which has given only hatred and ill-treatment to the Dalits. A very sensitive demand is made by Sharankumar Limbale in his poem, "White Paper" where he asks for nothing but basic human rights. He hates the tradition in which Dalits were treated as untouchables and not allowed any religious rights fearing pollution. The poet's anger at the unlawful nature of man to man is seen in the poem. He does not desire for any favour but for his own right which he deserves. The poem is an expression of the pain felt at being neglected and ill-treated. An optimistic end suggests the step for progress. Tormented by the exploitation, Namdeo Dhasal tries to reach the roots of the suffering in "Hunger." Basic needs of food, clothing and shelter not being fulfilled made many protest. Hunger makes an individual engage in wrong deeds and spoils their lives. Dhasal has written the poem in five units proving it to be of great importance and a basic need which should be fulfilled before it is too late. He writes:

Hunger
Which came first, seed or tree?
Hunger you make things too difficult
Hunger just tell us what breed this monkey is
And if you can't
Then we will screw
Seventeen generations of you
Hunger, you and your mother... (45)

The real outburst of emotions is expressed in the poem, "I Will Belong to It" by Arjun Dangle. He is aghast at the life of a poor individual who suffers miserably at the hands of destiny and man-made cruel society. At the age of enjoying, a young fellow sits twisting rope instead of admiring beauty of a young girl and taking pleasures of life. In old age, disease plays upon him and he meets his tragic end. Wherever he goes, may it be city or a village the condition remains the same. His anger against the soil, the country is evident when he says that his very existence is neglected by it. He wants a place where he can actually belong:

...Who will listen to whose agony
in this density of people?
I want a life
That has the vital sap
I want a soil
That, smeared on the brow,
Will bring tears to the eyes
I want a sun and a moon
Who will with their rays lasso me to them and caress
I don't want mere crowds, mere land
I want for it a name whose meaning
May engrave itself upon my heart,
And gently blow upon my endless pain.
It will belong to me and I belong to it. (39)

Thus the poems are a true reflection of the poets' experience of suffering and pain. The torture, injustice, animalistic treatment meted out to the underdogs in the so called sophisticated society hurts and makes them protest in various ways. Poetry is an expression of feelings experienced. Social injustice, economic problems, cultural conflicts and class discrimination spoils the lives of innocent, helpless people, making them miserable. The agony of a mother, the helplessness of a father and the children as well are some of the themes of the poems dealt with by many Dalit poets. The feeling of anger, hatred, rage, and helplessness are found in

majority of the poems by Dalit writers. Poverty, protest, pain, problems, pathetic situations etc. are an inseparable part of their lives.

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1.Dangle, Arjun (ed.) *Poisoned Bread* , Hyderabad: Orient Longman,1992, p.1

All subsequent references to the poems are from this edition.



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