

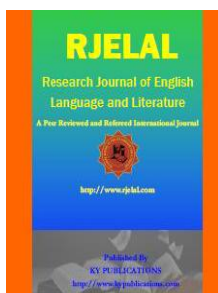


DALIT CHETNA AND THE AESTHETICS OF DALIT LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Identity creation—social or political, individual or communitarian, has always taken place through selective use of material, from the past and the discursive fields which surround it within a given political economy. The caste system, representing the most exclusionary form of social inequality always sought legitimacy in religion but was curiously buttressed by the demands of governmentality in the colonial period. As a result, the appearance of caste politics within the Indian social domain, in later years, was seen as a sign of political backwardness instead of, a breaking down of superficially delineated spheres. What came to light was the way in which the State's reliance on the colonial framework carried within it an ideological dependence on "traditional" forms of authoritarian power. The imagination of a new political collectivity was contingent, therefore, on the idea of the Dalit subaltern as a "stigmatized subject" but also as a "revolutionary figure." Strong political engagement was seen to be in need of cultural reinforcement. The path it sought to follow was of a particularist approach hoping to build a humanist understanding which would aid in attaining citizenship for the subject. . The aim of this paper would be to look at the coordinates along which the mapping of a Dalit consciousness has taken place under the influence of this kind of a single-minded politics but also their constant destabilization due to processes of recuperating "subaltern" traditions in disparate sources like Buddha, Kabir, medieval devotee mahar Chokhamela to Phule and Ambedkar. What kind of aesthetics does this "literature of commitment" give rise to will also be a concern of this paper.

KEY WORDS: Caste, Identity, Counter-culture, chetna, Dalit literature

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"A social transformation to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space – though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas."

- Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 54

"For me these poems are closures

They sort of conclude me

Though some of them like suicide bombers

May explode in your vicinity." –DilipChitre

Identity creation—social or political, individual or communitarian, has always taken place through the selective use of material, from the past and the discursive fields which surround it within a given political economy. The use of the word “creation” instead of “formation” is a conscious one and suitable to the context in which it is sought to be applied. It is meant to highlight the self-conscious modes of fashioning that have been adopted by the Dalit community in the post-independence era with the aim of political subject-formation. Various material and symbolic sources have been put to use for the purpose of “existential, political and ethical reordering of the Indian society” which has as its goal the emancipation of the Dalit subject. (Rao 1) As an ongoing process which finds Western ideas of secular liberalism emancipatory, it also finds itself hemmed in by structural entanglements produced due to a historical collusion of the colonial state and groups with vested interests, especially in the cultural field.

The caste system, representing the most exclusionary form of social inequality always sought legitimacy in religion but was curiously buttressed by the demands of governmentality in the colonial period. As Nicholas Dirks has explained, the colonial state was able to take caste and religion outside the domain of the political and redefine them as social categories and associational civic forms. It differentiated between the religio-ritual and the political. As a result, the appearance of caste politics within the Indian social domain, in later years, was seen as a sign of political backwardness instead of, a breaking down of superficially delineated spheres. What came to light was the way in which the State’s reliance on the colonial framework carried within it an ideological dependence on “traditional” forms of authoritarian power. The imagination of a new political collectivity was contingent, therefore, on the idea of the Dalit subaltern as a “stigmatized subject” but also as a “revolutionary figure.” Strong political engagement was seen to be in need of cultural reinforcement. The path it sought to follow was of a particularist approach hoping to build a humanist understanding which would aid in attaining citizenship for the subject.

This aim of creating a distinct political counter-culture has had a special bearing on the field of literary production. Due to its potency, a literary piece is considered as an intervention in the field and there is a constant call for life-affirming and engaged literature. The concept of a Dalit *chetna* or consciousness has become an integral aspect of Dalit critical analysis for determining whether a particular work belongs to the category of Dalit literature or not. “By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness,” is Sharankumar Limbale’s formulation in his *Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra*. Deeply immersed in Ambedkarite philosophy, Limbale’s conceptualization of Dalit aesthetics lays emphasis on a kind of experiential epistemology. As another critic has expressed it, “anubhava” (experience) takes precedence over “anuman” (speculation) serving as an “aesthetic corollary to the claims of social justice.” As a result of this emphasis on the particularity of experience, most of the corpus of Dalit literature is seen as mimetic and consisting largely of life-writing. The articulation of individual experiences of subjugation is seen as subversive but also representational for the entire community. However, the use of the notion of the “aesthetic” for Dalit writing has troubled many critics who view them simply as testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experience rather than poetic experimentation, supply of material for the anthropological study rather than literary articulation. Rather than imaginary amelioration, Dalit writings, whether poetry or prose, seek to trouble and anguish, and therefore, have a particular polemical purpose which informs their literary and aesthetic decisions. The aim of portraying “the real, the sordid and the ugly” is meant not only to expose the historical experience but to also defy easy assimilation within the reigning tastes by making the reader cringe. The aim of this paper would be to look at the coordinates along which the mapping of a Dalit consciousness has taken place under the influence of this kind of a single-minded politics but also their constant destabilization due to processes of recuperating

“subaltern” traditions in disparate sources like Buddha, Kabir, medieval devotee maharChokhamela to Phule and Ambedkar. The kind of aesthetics does this “literature of commitment” give rise to will also be a concern of this paper. The third part of this paper will look into the oeuvre of NamdeoDhasal’s work as an example of this mode of “self-affirmation” and its historical significance.

The earliest figure in the mytho-religious imaginary who served as an inspiration for the Dalit community, especially in Maharashtra was that of Chokhamela. A 13th-14th century saint in the Bhakti tradition, he is a revered figure in the *WarkariSampradaya*, which is connected with the tradition of pilgrimage to Pandhapur, the holy temple of Vithoba. Chokhamela’sabhangs are highly devotional poems expressing his deep devotion and love for Lord Vithhal but are also read as registers of protest against untouchability. In *Abhanga* 52 he says:

Cane is crooked, but its juice is not crooked,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The bow is crooked, but the arrow is not crooked
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The river is twisting, but its water is not crooked,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
Chokha is ugly but his feelings aren’t ugly,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?

Laying emphasis on a certain kind of humanism which had its genesis in the devotion to God and a spiritual belief in the love of a benign and accepting God, Chokhamela’sabhangs formed a part of the larger corpus of Bhakti poetry of the medieval period which became of greater interest during the Nationalist struggle and as a part of the nation-building project.

One of the earliest inaugurators of anti-caste discourse, connecting economic, social and political domination, was JotiraoPhule, who developed the earliest critique of caste and religious suppression in the nineteenth-century. In a number of books, such as *Ballad of Raja ChatrapatiShivajiBhonsle* (1869), *Priestcraft Exposed* (1869), and *Slavery* (1873), he began to construct a counter-history for the lower castes that drew

heavily on the prevalent idea of an Aryan invasion to explain the millennial suppression of the *shudras* (lower castes) and *atishudras* (untouchables). (Rao 11)Greatly influenced by him and another progenitor of the movement was Dr.BhimraoAmbedkar. The ubiquity of references to Ambedkar and the quasi-mythic status he has attained in Dalit politics today is indicative of the fact that the movement owes its existence to him and his philosophies.

Babasaheb—

Forgive me!

You detested idolatry.

You didn’t allow your followers to hero worship you.

I’ve committed this crime after you were gone.

I couldn’t do without writing

The poetry of your achievement.¹

While Gandhi can be attributed with making of untouchability as a central concern for Indian politics in the earlier part of the twentieth-century, he saw its eradication solely in terms of a ritual of self-purification of the collective Hindu self. Ambedkar, on the other hand, saw the problem in terms of a need for a separate political identity in the structures of social, economic and political power. It was a question of asserting self-respect for the stigmatised community as opposed to self-purification—a benevolent and patrimonial initiative of purgation on behalf of the upper-castes.

“The outcaste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste-system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma...”²

It is this strand of political thought around which the mobilization of the community has taken place. The most important strategy of the Dalit movement is a “coupling of the cultural theory of despair” with the “politics of hope”. (Nagaraj 105)

¹“Dedication” 134.

²*Harijan* I (1933):3

Milind Wakankar has compared the predicament of the lower caste groups to that of a tragic hero caught between silence (the horror of caste discrimination) and speech (empowerment as caste communities in electoral stakes). (5) This kind of predicament is visible in other spheres of the movement as well. The kind of violence which the Dalits try and reconcile with in everyday life and as a part of the social movement are of two kinds: change-resistant and retaliatory. A commitment to goals of the European Enlightenment, such as justice and equality is avowed as is a need for overhauling of a system which inflicts structural and epistemic violence. In such a scenario, the transition from silence to speech, distinguishes the sub-individual and marks his progress as the agential "I" meant to propel the individual-in-community into politics. (Wakankar 286)

Literature, as a part of this movement, aims at self-representation, creation and preservation of a cultural memory and, as an instrument in aid of its foray in the socio-political realm. As against the idea of aesthetic pleasure of canonical literature, "*brahmanandasahodarananda*," dalit literature has developed its own aesthetic yardstick in terms of the realism depicted in the text. Hindi writer, Omprakash Valmiki, writing on the aesthetics of Dalit literature has underlined the experiential nature of Dalit literature. The emphasis on form and meaning predominant in traditional canonical literature, according to him is solipsistic. The aim of Dalit literature is to find the requisite idioms through which social experiences of the community can be interpreted and verbalized. (49) In his formulation, he has enumerated five fundamentals of Dalit literature. Firstly, an emphasis on aspects of equality, freedom, real-life experiences and their narration; negation of forms which have relied on tradition and religion to distort reality and maintain their hegemony; constant repudiation of imaginary paradigms; an emphasis on the mutability of the fundamentals; and articulation of experiences without resorting to excessive verbiage.

D. R. Nagaraj, in his essay, contrary to most positions, proposes moving beyond identity politics towards a civilizational politics, and from a politics of rage to a politics of affirmation. He theorizes the

caste system as a mosaic of different contestations centred around dignity, religiosity, and entitlement. For him, limiting oneself to a literature of self-pity or rage would lead to segregation and would be self-defeating. Such a politics offers a definition of the Dalit as a totally impoverished being at all levels of existence—social, economic, political and cultural. He advocates a de-hierarchized literature where, the differences between categories of folk and classical, or religious and secular had been done away with. (190) He speaks of the need to move from political rage to cultural affirmation. Requiring a leap, both in the realm of imagination and politics, the aim would be to force caste Hindu society to alter its definition of Dalits as well as their modes of creativity. (209)

Namdeo Dhasal's poetry, in contrast to Nagaraj's vision, is very much in the tradition of poetry of political and social rage. It was in 1972 that Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Raja Dhale and J.V Pawar initiated a strong political movement known as Dalit Panther movement on the lines of the Black Panther movement organised in America in the 1960s and also drawing inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The same feelings of anger, agony and revolutionary hope imbued their poems. It aimed at representing a new level of pride, militancy and creativity through language. The tactical use of language by these Dalit poets, among other practices, reminds one of the stress laid on language by Fanon and other post-colonial writers. He said, "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valery knew this, for he called language "the god gone astray in the flesh." (9) In 1973, the Dalit Panthers revised their manifesto to include the scheduled tribes, Neo-Buddhists, working people, landless and poor peasant women and all those being exploited politically, economically or in the name of religion, as Dalits. Essentially a product of Ambedkarite vision of life, their poetry viewed anger as a liberating emotion and the experience of violence as one of release; as a cleansing force which restores their emotional wholeness and rescues them from a sense of non-being. Exploiting the materiality of everyday language, their poems

aimed at destroying the inbuilt censoring mechanism in literature which keeps out certain realms of experience which threaten dominant modes of perception.

I am a 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.

There's no moonlight anywhere;

There's no water anywhere.

A rabid fox is tearing off my flesh with its teeth;

And a terrible venom-like cruelty

Spreads out from my monkey-bone.³

Dilip Chitre, in his introduction to Dhasal's poetry, points out poetry's affinity with the spoken word. In its elemental form it is located in the human voice and remains a loquation. (9) Dhasal's poetry restores to poetry this ephemeral and immediate quality of a live performance. *Golpitha*, his first collection published in 1972, is redolent with the images from Kamatipura, the red-light area in Mumbai where he grew up and defines its locatedness in terms of the world it identifies with. Defined as the "no man's land" by Vijay Tendulkar, his poems traverse a landscape which is incommensurable with the bourgeois literary sensibility. The parlance and imaginary used by Namdeo, however, is perfectly commensurable with his own world, a world of the congenitally stigmatised untouchable further marginalised in the city. A loathsome and nauseating world, it is presented graphically evoking *bibhatsarasa*, says Chitre. An assault on the sensoria, the language of the poetry reeks of the sewers, garbage, urine, faeces and smoke that thickens the air of the neighbourhood. The barrack like *chawls*, which provide little privacy seem to squeeze within the same space the activities and lives of people, just as it is in Dhasal's poetry; a world of poor migrants from all parts of the country, labourers, prostitutes, petty criminals, street urchins—the lumpenproletariat, living in ghettos of the big

city. His aesthetic strategy aims at elevating quotidian things to the status of metaphors, to enumerate the banal and the repulsive; to attempt to rewrite myths in order to usher in social change. The figure of the prostitute serves as the perfect symbol for this world; castout and degraded but made use of.

Manda

Your mind is neither of ash nor of marble

I feel your hair, your clothes, your nails, your breasts

As they were my own: they reveal to me, within myself

Colonies of the dead; hunchbacks left to die in the streets;

Sandwiches; streets; milk of a she-dog that's just given birth to her litter,

They do not let me reach up to you; up to your lips; up to your eyes.

Until now, you and I were unrelated to each other.

And there were no calls to each other burrowing holes in us.

This period is as long as ten miles; as close as ten seconds;

And in its aria

You: Me: Seeds: A splinter of glass nibbling us;

And a thousand states of being.⁴

As a continuation of its polemological politics, the poems are meant to induce a certain "cognitive dissonance" in its predominantly middle-class caste-Hindu readership; an onslaught on sanitised and effete sensibilities. Namdeo uses the repulsive and nauseating as a conscious part of his aesthetic or rather, inaeesthetic strategy in stark opposition to the heroic, tragic, sensuous, comic or marvellous, elements of the so-called "touchable" poetry.

O Kamatipura

Tucking all seasons under your armpit

You squat in the mud here

I go beyond all the pleasures and pains of whoring and wait

For your lotus to bloom.

—A lotus in the mud.⁵

³ "Cruelty" from "GanduBagicha" (Arsefuckers Park) 100

⁴ "MandakiniPatil: A Young Prostitute, My Intended Collage" 56

This for Dhasalis the means of critical engagement with the society at large, by forcing it to engage with him on his turf, in his language. He does not differentiate between the political and the non-political, bringing in individual concerns and private relations into his poetry, combining the political act with the need for self-interpretation.

The face you find stirred up on the surface
of water is mine:

The foaming crown on the raised wave
About to touch a pride poised between
time and space.

Hell's bastions of suffering have begun to
crumble and fall.

I've made my self tired and unhappy here
on this seashore of pain;

Sculpting with a chisel an image of many-
faceted wounds.⁶

Reification of aesthetic value in the European context had begun as a protest against a materialistic universe which imposed a relative value upon all things and beings. As a movement in reverse, dalit poetry like much protest literature around the world seeks to keep away such reification and prevent an easy assimilation of their work in the established canon of hegemonic literature. The body of work of Dalit writers as a whole, marks a movement for the entire community from erasure to containment to self-assertion. Through the recuperation of mythic figures such as Shambuka, Eklavya, Ravana, Shurpanaka from Hindu religious literature, and their use in the portrayal of contemporary Dalit experience, the writers have managed to communicate the continuity of Dalit experience and its persistence in time and history. It has not remained confined to the quotidian reality of day-to-day experience in the present. This "representationality", makes the mimetic world of Dalit literature figurative. (Limbale 12) Thus, the aesthetics of Dalit literature, is drawn from its sense of social responsibility combined with humanistic thought which upholds liberal values such as liberty, equality and fraternity. It is a literature of

commitment which combines a deconstructivist enterprise such as, exposing and destroying those manufactured versions and processes of history and society that have been invoked through the centuries to legitimize the caste system and a constructivist endeavour which aims at establishing the full humanity of the Dalit.

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⁵ "Kamatipura" from "Tuhi Yatta Kanchi" (What's Your Grade?) 74

⁶ "Autobiography" from "Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi" (The Soul Doesn't Find Peace in this Regime) 112