

## SHATTERING THE SHACKLES: SHAPING THE SELF IN MARATHI DALIT POETRY

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### Abstract

*Dalit literature is characterized by the authenticity of experience and the agonies of life. Therefore, the language of the oppressed is lively and illuminating. The central purpose of Dalit poetry is to enable the development of a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit poets incite their fellow beings to unshackle themselves and to gather the courage to seek a better treatment from the society. They are now not going to rely upon this discourse of pity but to speak vehemently. This dire need to pen down one's own experiences into heart rending words has started shaking the inner most layers of human conscience resulting into a revolution. Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems – their writings articulate this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist-artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature as a movement. From the 60s onwards the flow of dalit literary writing in Maharastra increased significantly and Dalit Sahitya achieved the status of a standard school of literature.*

**Key Words:** Authenticity of Experience, New Consciousness, Standard school of literature

Dalit literature is characterized by the authenticity of experience and the agonies of life. Therefore, the language of the oppressed is lively and illuminating. Poetry born out of experience(anubhava), and not speculation(anumana) personifies hunger, embodies pain, loss of basic human rights and dignity Always prominent in their writings is the idea that certain notions have to be revolted against, some values have to be rejected, and some areas of life have to be strengthened and built upon. Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems – their writings articulate this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist-artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature as a movement.

. The horrendous state of the untouchables becomes all the more grim when we note that what it has done to their psychological state. It has been deeply impaired through the mishmash of a sense of imposed shame. The strength of mind of the untouchables has been battered and mortified, and their self confidence has been deeply eroded. The deep inner pain in the face of poverty, destitution and the humiliation they suffer is reflected in the following lines: *“God, make me a beast or a bird but not a Mahar (untouchable) at all”* (Bhansode12).

The central purpose of Dalit poetry is to enable the development of a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit poets incite their fellow beings to unshackle themselves and to gather the courage to seek a better treatment from the society. They are now not going to rely upon this discourse of pity but to speak vehemently. This dire need to pen down one's own experiences into heart rending words has started shaking the inner most layers of human conscience resulting into a revolution and this has acquired the form of a movement, the Salit Literary Movement.

Dalit writers have chosen violence as a strategy by presenting it through characters who take to violent means for settling the scores or exercise verbal violence by choosing such expressions that border on obscenity. In poems of some Dalit writers abuses are used to shock the sensibility of the readers.

It urges them to search for their own identity and instills in them a feeling of self-respect, self-pride and dignity. Dalit consciousness has made them aware of their identity as human beings. It revolts against the unjust and prevalent caste-system and desires to establish a new social order free from caste distinctions and based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The presence of the element of this consciousness in Dalit literature results in a realistic portrayal of Dalit pain and anguish. Dalit consciousness draws a line between Dalit literature and mainstream literature. It also draws a distinction between works by Dalit writers and non-dalit writers on Dalit issues. It is increasingly becoming a tool to measure the dalitness of a Dalit work.

The 60s saw many new things happening in Marathi literature. For the first time a poet-Narayan Surve- wrote about the problems of workers. The Little Magazine Movement also took root and flourished in this decade. Marathi literature made its acquaintance with the Angry Young Man. In Dalit literature Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were already established but the movement gained great momentum from the short stories of Baburao Bagul. In the 70s, a number of young poets like Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, and J.V.Pawar started writing during this period.

As the dalit writers of this period were familiarized with the Black Panthers of USA, poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V.Pawar established the Dalit Panthers in Mumbai in 1972. Since the leaders of this movement were all writers, writing about their

experiences attempted to blow a fresh whiff of air into the schizophrenic corridors of Marathi Brahmanic literature.

While Dalit literature as a school is the product of the 1960s, the dalit stream is ancient. Individual writers from among the untouchables appear as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> cy. Dalit poetry emerged during the Bhakti movement in the medieval period. Poet saints like Kabir, Chokhamela and Tukaram expressed the oppression of their caste and class through the medium of Bhakti poems. They voiced the oppression of the untouchables in a caste ridden society. Chokha mela, a Maharastrian saint, who was profoundly tortured by his despicable place in Society was the most prominent among them

The pangs of being marginalized can be seen in his numerous Abhangas. Chokha mela's plea to God for mercy reveals this:

*Oh God, My caste is low, how can I serve you?  
Everyone tells me to go away:  
How can I see you?  
When I touch anyone, they take offence  
Chokha Mela wants your mercy.(1-2).*

There are a number of questions burning in the minds of the dalit writers. If we all are the children of the same God, then why are we subject to discrimination on the basis of some man-made rules?

*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? (52).*

In the 60s the flow of dalit literary writing in Maharashtra increased significantly and Dalit Sahitya achieved the status of a standard school of literature with Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha*, Daya Pawar's *Kondwada* etc. Arjun Dangle gives a harrowing picture of their wretchedness in the poem entitled *Revolution*. They subsisted on the meat of dead animals fighting for their share with dogs and vultures:

*We fought with crows  
Never even giving them the snot from our/ noses  
As we dragged out the Upper Lane's dead*

*Cattle,  
Skinned it neatly  
And shared the meat among ourselves,  
We warred with jackals- dogs-vultures-  
kites  
Because we ate their share.  
They used to love us then (12).*

Jyoti Lanjewar speaks of the “inhuman atrocities which carved caves in the rock of the hearts” of the dalits:

*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?(22).*

But the spirit of revolution is evident in these lines:

*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 (22).*

The house imagery as used by these poets convey very effectively their pathetic sense of belonginglessness: “*He was born here/but didn’t belong here*”(34).

Also see the lines:

*He went inside  
and shut himself up.  
Then he saw  
that the rear wall of his house  
had vanished  
and the whole sky  
with its thousand eyes/had invaded the house (34).*

Many of the poems by Dalit poets were framed in the form of a dialogue between father and son, where father appears as a symbol of docile and less volatile dalit and son emerges a symbol of the new generation of Dalits.

Tryambak Sapkale’s *That Single Arm*, in the form of a conversation between father and son, gives an impressive contrast between the outlook of the older and the younger generation. The father shows him a picture where a rich man is about to kill a poor man.

While the father accepts it to be their lot to be trampled by the rich upper caste, the son's mindset is entirely different:

*He said, 'Father, wait a moment.'  
He hurried to the table and took out  
a razorblade from a drawer.  
Once back, he sliced off  
the attacker's arm from the shoulder (3).*

He represents the new generation, the harbingers of revolution, who are ready to take cudgels against their oppressors for they believe that:

*No, they cannot attack him,  
for the vision of that single arm  
will remain before them(3).*

The father in Waman Kardak's *Send My boy to School* is too eager to send his son to school for he, like any other dalit of that age hopes that education is the panacea for all social maladies. Despite all his poverty and adversities, he says:

*We may be terribly poor  
Famine may knock at our door  
I'll see that he gets to school  
Send my boy to school (8).*

He is optimistic that an educated man will be empowered and that he will not be anyone's fool:

*He's got something from society; in return  
My boy is going to learn  
He'll be a lawyer; nobody's fool  
Send my boy to school etc (8).*

The Dalit poets captures the existential dilemma of their very birth in their poems. Unable to bear the brunt of the grave atrocities meted out on these down trodden, they even wonder why they were born or rather to be or not to be born. In the poem '*Why were you born*', Jyoti Langewar is bothered about the birth of a dalit in their tragic plight :

*And why were you born  
in this ghetto  
of rotten lampposts  
dust-choked streets  
and stumps of trees*

*with elephantiasis  
why were you born? (12).*

In 'To Be or Not To be', L.S.Rokade laments:

*Sorry, mother, but truth to tell  
I must confess I wondered  
Should I be born  
Should I be born into this land? (2).*

The lower castes are totally confused as to what to think? What to say? what to do? Arjun Kamble raises a very vital question: "Now I ask you/Which Language Should I Speak?"(54)

Reeling under poverty and homelessness for ages and ages, it has become a part of their psyche and several poets had expressed this feeling of abject deprivation and destitution. Mina Londe in 'Poem' portrays this feeling as:

*Don't look at me if you were orphan.  
We were more than refugees  
without homes here  
a burden of centuries on our backs  
and even with that no foot prints  
on this muddy piece of land  
If the earth is not ours  
How can we speak of the sky?(1-2).*

Shankar Kharat says that what they demand from this world is nothing but their basic rights:

*I do not ask  
for the sun and moon from your sky  
your farm, your land,  
your high houses or your mansions  
I do not ask for gods or rituals,  
castes or sects  
Or even for your mother, sisters, daughters.  
I ask for  
my rights as a man"(64).*

The poet continues: "I want my rights, give me my right (64).

He is bold enough to face death because he wishes to fight for his people and as he knows that poets can save the earth from extinction, he wants to sacrifice his life for them. One can observe his boldness when Dhasal sings:

*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 (111).*

At the peak of protest, the poet Sharan Kumar Limbale challenges:

*You'll beat me, break me,  
loot and burn my habitation  
But my friends!  
How will you tear down my words  
planted like a sun in the east?  
I'll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks.  
Burn like a city bus your lawless laws  
My friends!  
My rights are rising like the sun.  
Will you deny this sunrise? (64-65).*

L.S.Rokade rejects the meek and submissive manner of the older generation and the following lines reveal the militant nature of the present generation:

*Mother, this is your land  
flowing with water  
Rivers break their banks  
Lakes brim over  
And you, one of the human race  
must shed blood  
struggle and shake  
for a palmful of water  
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?(1-2).*

The speaker in Yashwant Manohar's poem '*I'm Ready for Revolt*' is indeed ready to wage a war against injustice and inequality.

*I'm burning with a feeling of revolt  
and I call out to you  
I will write the poem of revolt on your sword  
Today I have become a storm-come with me!  
I reach out to you- give me your hand!  
I have become the sun, my friend- sing with me!  
I have become the fire, today I am afire with fire  
give voice to the volcano within you! (8).*

The echoes of a rebellious soul can be heard in these lines in *I Have Become a Tide* by J.W.Pawar:

*I'm now the sea; I soar; I surge.  
I move out to build your tombs.  
The winds, storms, sky, earth.  
Now all are mine.  
In every inch of the rising struggle  
I stand erect (19).*

In a country where they are segregated as untouchables, as even their shadows will defile others, they are writhing in anguish. The protest in his mind takes the form of a question. Baburao Bagul in *You Have Made the Mistake* rages:

*What's an untouchable like? What does he look like?  
Does he look like the very image of leprosy?  
Or like the prophet's enemy?  
Does he look like a heretic, a sinner, a profligate, or an atheist?(70).*

They are humiliated for no fault of theirs. The only mistake they had done is that they happened to be born in this land where unscrupulous hegemony reigns supreme. Painfully they conclude that they have only two options, either to leave their homeland or opt for a revolution. They are forced to take the course of war when they realize with agony that nothing in this democratic country can save them.

*You who have made the mistake  
of being born in this country  
must now rectify it: either leave the country,  
or make war (70).*



Dalits have been humiliated and discriminated right from the beginning of their existence to the end. Quite naturally, this long injustice had aroused a feeling of revenge in the sufferers. Gradually this revenge in thought got converted to action. The subjected and the subjugated are getting ready to wage a war against their tormentors. J.V.Pawar in his poem 'It's Reddening on the Horizon' says that dalits have endured enough for a long time. Now they have crossed the borders of tolerance and are not going to endure the injustice perpetuated on them and will start a revolution.

*These twisted fists won't loosen now  
The coming revolution won't wait for you.  
We've endured enough; no more endurance now.  
Won't do letting down your bloods call to arms  
It won't do...(23).*

The dalits are burning with a desire for revenge. Their anger is spit on the face of the Brahmanic hegemony and they enjoy a secret satisfaction when he sees the Indian upper castes being humiliated by the Americans as Blacks, just as the dalits are treated in their own country. This anger is reflected in 'You Wrote From Los Angeles' by Daya Pawar:

*In the stores here, in hotels, about the  
streets,  
Indians and curs are measured with the  
same Yard-stick.  
Niggers'! 'Blacks'! This is the abuse they  
fling on me.  
Reading all this, I felt so damn!  
Now you've has a taste of what we've/  
suffered  
In this country from generation to generation (7).*

Jyoti Lanjewar in *The Nameless Ones* exhorts the dalits to be prepared for a revolution. Because merely begging at the steps of the uppercastes won't bring any good for them as has been proved all these years. They had also realised that asking for their rights at the government also is of no use.

*Begging won't get anything here/not sympathy, not love  
A suit in court wins justice,  
Tears are of no value,  
Getting water is a struggle*

*Wrapping yourself in smoke from a dead fire won't work  
You have to plant the cinder of revolt in your body.  
At times there is a firefly of revolt flickering- may be  
Counterfeit  
But at those times give it outside air to see if it glows (7).*

This streak of revolution can be seen in many poems of those days. Another example is Mina Gajbhiye's poem *Peace* where she envisages dalit poetry as a form of revolution:

*Crows flocks and flocks  
In every corner  
caw shrilly  
Souls fed on funeral cry  
the revolution has come  
the revolution has come.*

What the Dalits envision for themselves is beyond the comprehension of their tormentors and it may even shock them:

*Ekalavya is chopping of Drona's thumb  
With an axe.  
With a smile on his face,  
Shambooka is killing Rama.  
Bali is trampling Vamana  
With his small feet to hell.  
Manu is piercing his eyes with needles,  
Cut his tongue,  
Pouring lead in his ears  
Is tossing and turning in the cemeteries (34).*

Direct protest is the message of much Dalit literature. In one of his poems, "What would you do?" Om Prakash Valmiki not only questions but also cross-examines the oppressors in Indian society,

*What would you do?  
If you  
Have to swim against the current  
To open the doors of pain  
And to battle with hunger  
If you  
Are denied in your own land*

*Made slave labour  
Stripped of your rights  
The pages of your glorious history  
Torn to shreds  
And thrown away  
What would you do?.*

The lies in Hindu mythology which had perpetrated the caste system have always been a topic of constant attention in their writings.

*You said  
The shudra is born from the feet of  
Brahma  
And the Brahmin from his head  
And they did not ask you  
Where was Brahma born from?(4-5)*

Daya Pawar in his poem *Oh! Great Poet* asserts:

*Oh great poet, how then should we call you a great poet?  
Had you written just one single verse exposing this injustice,  
this outrage  
Then would your name have been carved on your hearts(18-19).*

The writer stands confidently and is so sharp and aggressive so that his words pierce the listener's ears :

*Listen , supreme man  
You listen too, Dronacharya!  
We despise you  
We spit on your past  
And your beliefs (8-9).*

Dalit writings as a whole rebels against the assumptions of Hindu ideologies and the passionate rejection of Hindu culture is reflected in this poem by V.L.Kalekar,

*I reject your culture  
I reject your Parmeswar-centred tradition  
I reject your religion based literature(4).*

The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society changes and as long as exploitation exists. Self-assertion is seen in these lines,

*No! No ! No!*

*A triple rejection  
to your economic, social, political ,religious,  
moral and cultural No! No pollution.  
I am a new sun  
Independent, self-luminating,  
possessed of a new spirit  
I may bend but I won't break (45).*

Deconstruction of mythological characters is an important feature of dalit poetry. Their subversion of myths is quite in keeping with the thoughts and views of Ambedkar about Hinduism. Modern dalit poets blame Ekalavya for being a symbol of a submissive shishya'. They would have liked him to revolt. If so, he would not have lost his finger. Sashikant Hingonekar in his Ekalavya says:

*If you had kept your thumb  
History would have happened somehow differently.  
But...you gave your thumb and history also  
became theirs.  
Ekalavya,  
since that day they  
have not given you a glance  
Forgive me, Ekalavya, I don't be fooled now  
by their sweet words.  
My thumb/ will never be broken(11).*

Dalit literature not only subverts the old canons but also believes in creating new ones. It seeks to reject those conventions and cultural norms which marginalized the dalit voice. It attempts to create a new paradigm, a new set of value adding up to the contemporary cultural scenario.

Ekalavya is the traditional symbol of ideal guru bhakti. That is why he gives away his thumb to Drona, his guru. But Trymbak Sapkale recreates history by employing the image of Ekalavya as an embodiment of moral strength:

*The round earth  
A steel liver  
in my hand  
But no leverage?  
Oh Ekalavya  
You, ideal disciple!*

*Give me  
the finger you cut off  
that will be my fulcrum(9).*

The future of Dalit movement in poetry seems to be sharing the concerns and dreams of all the exploited and socially oppressed toiling masses of the world. The Dalits dream of a future where they meet the same world but with changed relations. Their dreamland will be an ideal place where newly born innocent dreams will not have the feelings of born in a graveyard, a place where the poison of discrimination will not exist', and where the poet firmly believes and ideally dreams. In short, Dalit literature expresses the anxiety, desire and pain of centuries of caste struggle, and the creative visions of social justice put forward by the writers of the Dalit movement should inspire and shape the consciousness of local and transnational participants, in battle against all oppressive and exploitative systems.

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