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A CRITICAL STUDY OF THEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF SELECT DALIT POETRY IN ARJUN DANGLE'S 'POISONED BREAD'

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In the post Ambedkar era Dalit movement became stagnant and left without a strong and effective leadership. As a result, Dalits were subjected to lot of hardships and atrocities by the upper castes. Many young Dalit poets like Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Arjun Dangle, Namdev Dhasal, J. V. Pawar, Yogiraj waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram who developed during this period began to write about these atrocities and injustice in various magazines and periodicals such as Little Magazine and *Asmitadarsha*. A number of young Dalit writers appeared in *Asmitadarsha*. Further, 1970s gave rise to a militant Dalit Panther movement dedicated to social activism and literature of the Dalit *asmita*. They were all writers influenced by the Black Panther movement and its literature in America popularly known as Harlem Renaissance in 1920s. Many thinking critics from Dalit society started to put forth their views about Dalit literature and its noble role in the social reformation. Almost all Dalit writers started with the poetry and unfurled various aspects of their experiences on various planes in their language.

A number of new streams appeared during this period. Narayan Surve's poetry which portrayed the problems of workers came into being during this period. This period was also characterised by the Little Magazine movement and emergence of the Angry Young Man in Marathi literature. Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat had been writing about the Dalits. Narayan Surve's rebellious poetry was highly influenced by Marxism, published in Little Magazine called *Fakta*. His poetry is seen in his two anthologies *Aisa Ga Mi Bramha* and *Majhe Vidyapith*. Poems in these anthologies have given a new direction to Marathi poetry.

The first representative collection of poems by the Dalits called *Akar* was published in the conference

organised by Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha in 1967. *Akar* comprised poems by Baburao Bagul, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Yadavrao Gangurde, Bandhumadhav, Chokha Kamble, Hira Bansode etc.

In 1972, *Golpitha* a monumental volume of poetry by Namdev Dhasal was published which shook the world of Marathi poetry and its traditional values. As young poet Dhasal expressed his experiences aggressively and portrayed the explosive acute pain of the Dalits. During the same time *Gaokusabaheril Kavita* was published by Waman Nimbalkar a portrayal of the heart wrenching condition of Dalits in rural India.

The language employed in Dalit poetry was very shocking to the traditionalists. It revolutionised the Marathi literary landscape and inspired a whole movement of Dalit literature in the rest of the Indian languages. Dalit poetry represented anger and reflected Dalits protest against the vicious social discrimination. Dalit poetry had brought into the realm of Marathi literature the anger of the marginalised and their protest against the establishment. In the initial phase of the Dalit literary movement, the critical response to it was far from literary. First, there was a sense of disbelief on the part of main stream writers. The use of language full of regional varieties was seen as the writer's inability to handle the literary Marathi. They found the world of cultural reference in Dalit writing confusing, shocking and lacking in cultural depth. Dalit writing was initially seen with scepticism and even ridiculed. But Narayan Surve, Namdev Dhasal and Daya Pawar had given Marathi poetry a new tone and power and their acceptance by the little magazine had made an assured space for Dalit expression in Marathi literature.

Dalit writers are greatly influenced by the philosophy and writings of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who

is recognised as the precursor of Dalit movement and Dalit literature. Dr. Ambedkar taught his people the gospel of the Lord Buddha Atma Dipo Bhava (Be lamp to thyself). Dr. Ambedkar's inspirational life and his teaching is the major theme of Dalit literature.

In 'Identity Crisis in Dalit Literature', Dr. Ali Ahmed Khan comments that "Dalit literature has created its own alternative aesthetic by redrawing the map of literature in discovering and exploring a whole new continent of experience that has so far been left to darkness and silence, by helping literature overcome stagnation through a cleansing renewal, by disturbing the sterile complacency of the dominant social groups, by challenging their set mores and modes of looking at reality, their stale habits of ordering knowledge, beauty and power and their established literary canons, bringing to focus neglected, suppressed or marginalised aspects or experience, vision, language and reality and forcing the community to refashion its tools and observe itself critically, from a fresh and different angle. Dalit poetry rejects the norms set by Brahmanic poetics and throws overboard classical values like propriety, balance, restraint and understatement. The diction of these poets is deliberately subversive as it challenges the middle class notions of linguistic decency."

One of the main emphases of Dalit poetry is to reconstruct history from the subaltern sections point of view. These poets refer to events and characters which are victims of class and caste hatred and subordination. By sympathising with them they would like to generate a feeling oneness with those who are projected as marginal. The mythical characters like Shurpanakha, Shambhuk, Karna and Eklavya have been the historical favourites of the Dalit writers. They do not accept Ram who deserted Sita, but Shambhuka was their ideal from *Ramayana* and Eklavya from *Mahabharat*. There is also a point of view that Dalit writers should seek myth in Buddhism for their creative endeavour.

Conversion to Buddhism by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar with his millions of followers is also a central theme in this literature. There are folk songs praising Ambedkar and expressing gratitude towards him for his

struggle against social injustice and bringing social and religious enlightenment among Dalits. The event of conversion at Nagpur in 1956 is hailed as a historic episode, and Dalit writers have showered praise on Ambedkar for breaking an umbilical cord with Hinduism and its debauched culture. There is recognition of the fact that Dr. Ambedkar helped dalits in raising their consciousness, to instill in them a sense of self-pride and self-dignity. He was instrumental in making them aware of the indignities and dehumanization arising out of untouchability. He gave them the message of their salvation. In fact, prior to Dr. Ambedkar on the horizon of social struggle for equality, Dalits or so called untouchables were ignorant, confused and completely unaware of their pathetic condition which they accepted as god's decree. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar humanised them by instilling in them self respect and dignity. He diagnosed their social disease in true sense and organised them for their own upliftment from their wretchedness. To achieve their rights, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar gave his people a call to 'Educate, Unite and Agitate'. They followed their leader diligently like disciples of the Buddha.

There is nothing so special in the culture and tradition of ancient India which holds an entire section of society in its pervasive submission. Its Puranas and Scriptures are nothing but the hymns of commandments against the *Shudras* and *Ati-shudras* which a Dalit cannot own with pride. Dalit writers can accept some myths from the *Puranas*, history or Buddhist literature so are insistent on using their own imageries and expressions which are rooted in their own experiences and perceptions. The most important is untouchability and it would not be wrong to say that Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and its appalling nature of exploitation.

In this paper the researcher would like to analyse some select poems from Arjun Dangle's 'Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature', which is probably the first authoritative anthology of Dalit literature in English translation. This paper will attempt to pinpoint common themes such as

exploitation, helplessness, anger and rebellion of Dalits against the unjust social system.

L. S. Rokade in his protest against the disgusting social condition of India, wonders whether 'To be or Not to be Born' in this land where one of the human races must shed blood, struggle and strike for a palmful of water. The poet condemns this unjust 'great' civilization and declines to sing its glory in the following poem.

To be or Not to be Born

*Mother, you used to tell me
when I was born
your labour was very long.
The reason, mother,
the reason for your long labour:
I, still in your womb, was wondering
Do I want to be born –
Do I want to be born at all
in this land?
Where all paths raced horizonwards
but to me were barred
All of you lay, eyes fixed on the sky
then shut them, saying
calmly, yes,
the sky has a prop, a prop!
Your body covered
with generations of dire poverty
Your head pillowed
on constant need
You slept at night
and in the day you writhed
with empty fists tied to your breasts!
Here you are not supposed to say
that every human being comes
from the union of man and woman
Here, nobody dare
broaden the beaten track.
You ran round and round yourself
exclaiming YES, of course
the earth is round, is round.
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 strike
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?
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?*

In the following poem, the poet Tryambak Sapkale wants to register his strong protest against the exploitation of poor by rich and upper caste people. He shows dalits' sentiment of rebellion against injustice through a child's point of view. Which, I feel a warning call to the upper caste people who incur inhuman atrocities on the poor even in the 21st century. The poet has used a metaphor of 'the vision of that single arm' very brilliantly to depict the reverberation of that warning.

That Single Arm

*I was looking through a book of pictures
My small son Raja came, looked through them
too.
In one picture a rich man
was beating a poor one.
Raja asked, 'Why is that man beating the
other?'
Because he's rich.
As I turned the page...
There again was the rich man,
weapon in right hand,
about to kill the poor man.*

*My son looked at this.
He said, 'Father, wait a moment.'
He hurried to the table and took out
a razor blade from a drawer.
Once back, he sliced off
the attacker's arm from the shoulder.
Then looked at me triumphantly.
I said, there are people to help him.
No, they cannot attack him,
for the vision of that single arm
will remain before them.*

Jyoti Lanjewar's poem 'Caves' is full of a feeling of revolt at the inhuman treatment accorded to her people. She says that the inhumanity is so pervasive and so deeply implanted against them that the Dalits have no way out except to rebel.

Caves

*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.*

Their fight is complex and they have to wage a war on many fronts, against the scriptures that insists that the Varnas are commandments engraved on stone; against the high castes who have stamped approval on this discrimination and against the very nation whose

laws have cast them in a blackened darkness. The prison walls in which they are enclosed are so strong that breaking them is unthinkable, perhaps they will entomb the Dalits never to rise again. And yet they feel that together they have enough strength in them to break the walls, and those who cannot have no reason to live. D. S. Dudhalkar brings this sentiment in the following poem.

Wall

*I recently took a contract
to demolish the walls of buildings.
It's not only buildings
that have walls;
villages do, too.
And we have heard of world wars
fought for the walls of nations.
For the time being, I'm just demolishing walls.
I don't know how many generations have gone
by
But these walls
built by the grandpas
of that time
are really tough.
Did they need to be so hardened
to protect human beings?
Many people on many occasions
raised their their hands against them
For some, their hands
became bloodied.
While the flag of others
succeeded in fluttering.
Just the other day
reading history
I realised my eyes
had been entombed in walls.
And my organs of sense
lay mutely by those walls
like motionless refugees.
On enquiring, I found out
the walls themselves
had drugged them with opium
Maybe that's why I see*

even today,
 machinations in walls.
 What does one say to these people
 engrossed in politely hiding
 that they're slaves of the age!
 I myself
 should break down these walls
 and become
 a compass to them.
 That's why, with a special purpose,
 I've taken this job:
 It won't be finished right away
 But I too don't wish
 to finish right away.
 Once I've smashed these walls –
 new houses will take birth
 Spacious and lovely.
 Only those who can endure
 space wide enough to gallop in
 should live – or else
 they're welcome to die.
 I'll offer a memorial prayer,
 and be done with it.

The Dalit question has been very powerfully raised by the literature written by the dalits. They have enormous faith in the power of words and through the words problems of the Dalits could be solved. We find time and again such voices of protest and hope in the poems written by Dalit poets. Limbale's following poem 'White Paper' is a powerful expression of this sentiment in which he demands his basic rights at any cost. He compares his rights with the sunrise which no one can deny to him.

White Paper

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.
 Each breath from my lungs
 sets off a violent trembling
 in your texts and traditions
 your hells and heavens
 fearing pollution.
 Your arms leapt together
 to bring to ruin our dwelling places.
 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?
 My rights: contagious caste riots
 festering city by city, village by village,
 man by man
 For that's what my rights are –
 Sealed off, outcast, road-blocked, exiled.
 I want my rights, give me my rights.
 Will you deny this incendiary state of things?
 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?

Dalit poets at times make fun of concepts like patriotism. The extreme expression of anger against the caste discrimination and untouchability as its acute phenomenon is evident in Dalit poetry, when the great Dalit poet like Baburao Bagul, salutes to those who have left India and forgot this country. But on the contrary he curses to those 'hypocrites' who are still attached to this land despite that they have been treated worse than animals for centuries. He poses them with several questions, condemns their attitude and proclaims that they have made the mistake of being born in this country. Therefore, the only alternative they have is either to leave the country or make a war.

You who have Made the Mistake

Those who leave for foreign lands,

embrace other tongues, dress in alien garb
and forget this country
– them I salute.
And those who don't forget,
and don't change even after being beaten up
for centuries
-such hypocrites I ask:
What will you say if someone asked you –
What is untouchability?
Is it eternal like God?
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?
Tell me,
What will your answer be?
Will you reply without hesitation:
'Untouchable – that's me?'
That's why I say –
You who have made the mistake of being born
in this country
must now rectify it: either leave the country,
or make war!

Social segregation and helplessness remain the key sentiments in Dalit poetry. The Dalits live in the wretched, the miserable and the utter dejection. Bapurao Jagtap's poem 'This Country is Broken' deals with the similar sentiment. While justifying his conversion to Buddhism, Dr. Ambedkar had rightly affirmed that the Dalits had no hope in the Hindu fold as they were deprived of enthusiasm in the Hindu religion.

This Country is Broken

*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
and deny that 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.*

In the beginning Dalit writing has been largely about articulating protest, self-respect, angst, identity, dignity, critiquing religion, politics, patriarchy, Dalit patriarchy and the demand for space for Dalits in social, cultural, and political spheres. However writers attacking traditional icons and symbols were not equally vocal as to what to replace them with. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar publicly burnt the *Manusmriti* in 1927; this needed an alternative icon, and Buddhism that he embraced in 1956 provided an alternative to Dalits. To them the Noble Eightfold Path towards *Nibbana* shown by the Buddha is the only way for the total emancipation of their suffering. This path helps to promote, as Einstein says, 'cosmic religious feeling' and scientific temperament in the individual. With the maturing of Dalit writing in the last two decades, there have been attempts at drawing from alternative literary, cultural and religious sources. By doing so, contemporary Dalit writers are now clearly deviating from the established norms, styles and techniques of mainstream writing.

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