

Nature and Voice of the Dalit: Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal

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Abstract:

In recent decades, Dalit literature has tremendously flourished as a branch of literature altogether. The ideas like Dalit Feminism have also been popularly incorporated into the discussion of Dalit literature. Nationwide a bunch of writers have retorted to these concerns. It is in this context that the discussion of the Dalit writings in various frameworks becomes a demanding illustration of the Dalit literatures. Namdeo Dhasal, a Dalit Activist and a Marathi poet, is a Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi awardee. His works are reflective of the illustrative voice of the Dalit. There are references to untouchability and other social evils in his poems. What makes his writing so significant is the insider's view echoed in the poems. A reading of a few poems sensitizes the readers about the use of natural elements in the poems. This paper attempts to discuss the intertwining of the world of nature and the voice of the Dalit in the poetry of Dhasal. This paper argues that the presentation of nature in the poems is not co-incidental, rather it is well adjusted with the pivotal theme, i.e. representation of the voice of the Dalit. Sometimes he draws reader's attention to nature to negotiate the end of prevailing discrimination in the society. He writes the poetry of protest. For some, his writing is either prophetic or a maneuver of anger. Whatever the tone is, his poetry reflects social realism which is beyond one's doubt. In this context, the indication towards nature also becomes substantial. Taking it for granted will be to veer away from a major exploration of his poetry. My paper intends to shed light on this peculiar note.

Key Words:

Nature, Dalit-Writings, Discrimination, Intertwining, Substantial.

Namdeo Dhasal is one of the pioneering poets to raise the voice of the Dalit through his writing. He is one of the representative poets writing primarily on the concerns of the Dalit community. Even an overview of the poems also distinctly suggests the empathetic tone towards the sufferings of the marginalized. Dhasal's poetry is significant to realize the condition of the oppressed in the society. The socio-cultural and economic status of the Dalit has remained to be a pivotal concern in many poems by the poet. Dhasal basically wrote in Marathi. But most of his works are translated into English and many Indian languages. *Golpitha*, *Tubi Iyatta kanchi*, *Khel*, *Gandu Bagichha* are the poetry collections to his credits. Moreover, his prose works include *Ambedkar Chahval*, *Andhale Shatak* and *Budha Dharma: Kabi Shesh Prasna* etc.

In the present paper, it is endeavored to discuss how the voice of the Dalit and the depiction of nature can be interlinked in the poetry by Dhasal. The intention of the paper is also to highlight the poet's frequent reference to the objects of nature. The primary argument is to discuss the relevance of the reference to nature in the thematic concern, i.e. the representation of the voice of the Dalit. I will attempt to throw light in what context both these apprehensions can be interweaved.

In the poem called "Ambar/ Sky Alcohols in the Glass" there are mentions of 'Ambar', 'Ganges', 'Juhu Beach' and the 'the frogs in the earthenware pot'. All these are the natural elements reinvented in the imagination of the poet to bring out the thematic concerns. The poet, in this particular poem, appeals the Ganges to flow like a 'raga'. It is a personification of the Ganges. The poet, again, says that his is a 'sky' that appears in the color of alcohol kept in a tiny glass. The soothing fragrance of the beach fails to capture the reality of the people around as the tune of the flute is not unmasked of hidden cruelty. Thus, these references indicate that many a time the

poetic persona finds himself aligned with the existence of the nature. Hence, at the very beginning of the poem, the speaker attributes his life with a sky-like existence. His heart can embrace everyone just like a sky can hug all irrespective of caste and creed. But such a beautiful heart is now compelled to think of the communal concerns. Against such issues, the poet is in thirst of liberty. The flow of Ganges is also used as a symbol. The poet may crave the nondiscriminatory flowing like that of Ganges to live peacefully in the earth. The imagery of the hidden frog in the 'earthenware pot' hints at the poet's appeal to destroy the concealed yet negative forces that harm the harmony. The following lines from the poem reflect the same:

"Come come come God

Crush the frogs in the earthenware pot." (Anand & Zelliott 48)

Somehow in the poem, nature is one in all to reflect on all the sorrows of the poet. Through nature the poet finds out his voice to take a stance against all the unfair treatment faced by his community. Again, in the poem "Now, now", the poet uses the imagery of 'Sun' and 'Sunflowers'. The poet, here, expresses that people have come away from the path built up by the rays of the Sun. It may mean that the path chosen by people will lead only towards darkness. The disharmony among people causes that darkness. Hence the poet's urge is to choose the path of the Sun, which is of harmony and integrity. The sun is the symbol of the positivity much needed. Towards the end of the poem, the poet calls the people 'sunflower'. Like a 'sunflower', these people now need to look towards the rays of the sun. This poem also applies nature as a mechanism to exert the poet's appeals to the people to fight against the social evils like discrimination over caste and creed. Following lines from the poem reflects the same:

"Sky!

After a thousand years we were blessed with a
Sunflower-giving fakir;

Now, now, we must, like sunflowers, turn our faces to the sun." (Anand & Zelliott 53)

In the poem, "Song of the Republic and the Dog", such tones are repeated. The poet says that the stoned heart of the people cannot share love and care. The skin of the rhinoceros is hard enough. It is also used as a symbol in the poem. People have now a skin that of a rhinoceros, hard enough to hide many things behind the surface. 'The Banyan Tree' is also a symbolic representation of all the natural things, which owe rights to all the individuals in the world. The Dalit irrespective of their caste also has the right over all the things in the world. This is what reverberates throughout the poem. "Ambedkar: 79" is a poem celebrating the contribution of Ambedkar towards the upliftment of the deprived communities. The poem is a kind of tribute to Ambedkar. But the poem also shares the truth that after the demise of Ambedkar, his 'followers' do not follow his ideologies. A 'monumental' death was not respected by the following generations. This poem also ends up referring to the natural elements. The demise of Ambedkar has been claimed as the disappearance of 'green dreams.' Here, one can see the way nature and the upliftment of the Dalit have been interlinked by the poet. Writing about the poem, S K Arora expresses in "Voicing Dalits: The Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal":

All the Dalit authors seek inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar whom they consider the human pivot for all Dalits though he never wished idolatry from his followers. The poet in Dhasal adores him because of his contribution in getting Dalits a place and identity. He bows his head before Babasaheb and is ready to suffer for any punishment for writing the poetry of his achievement. (p. 221)

Not only to raise the voice of the Dalit, but also to bring forth the voices of the poor and the other deprived groups, the poet brings in the elements of nature. In the poem "Leaving the House", the poet talks about 'slums' 'beggars' and 'wasteland'. At the end, there is a reference to the 'sky'. The poet says, 'sky us.' It may symbolically mean the thirst for freedom. One can argue that the poet has symbolically and metaphorically connected the voice of the subordinated to the nature. Nature, meanwhile, becomes a mechanism for the poet to express sorrows and expectations. "Kamatipura" is Dhasal's one of the celebrated poems. Unlike the poems discussed

above, this poem is significantly symbolic in meaning. Almost every word is loaded with layers of meaning. It is interesting that the poem has sufficient references to nature. Kamatipura, one of the largest areas in Asia, is known for prostitution. The poem is about the poverty, deprivation, angst and anguish of the prostitutes. Last stanza says that the speaker thrives in mud to blossom like a lotus. The addressee, in the words of the speaker, crouches in the mud throughout the seasons. One can see the link the poet brings in between the portrayed theme and the elements of nature. It is as if the natural happenings reflected what the poet wanted to hint at.

“New Delhi, 1985” is a poem pointing towards the celebration of the Independence Day in India Gate. But the celebration is mocked at by the lines in the second stanza of the poem. The poet writes that even the water flow in Jamuna gets exposed. This is a usage of transferred epithet. The town, which is corrupted with unethical deeds, is in reality seen by all. Yet the glorification of power in the aforesaid celebration endeavors to mask that. In this venture also, the poet brings in the imagery of ‘rose’. He writes that the rose is stained with blood now. “Cruelty” is a poem stating the speaker’s agony lying inside the heart. The speaker can see the cruelty suffered by thousands of people. There is an earnest desire to represent the voice of the oppressed. The speaker claims that the natural elements also respond to the societal happening. It is because of the surrounding water in the river that dries up. No moonlight can be found out. The speaker wants to fall for the stars and so that he can forget his agony. Now the Satan speaks out to point out the age-old hollowness. The poem is about the discernment and other societal tribulations. It brings forth the injustice prevailing in the society. While portraying that, the poet deliberately links up the voice of the nature. Nature is a part of the poet’s thematic venture. “Speculations on A Shirt” is about people’s hatred and discrimination among different caste and creed. People are engaged in disguised love. What is conventionally understood as love is the hidden cruelty of the people. The poet’s earnest urge is to change the generally accepted definition of love. The historical nature of human relationship needs to be inquired so that one can understand the flaws intervening our conventional understanding of the idea of love. The poem ironically appeals people that stainless shirt of the people has to be spotted. It means that what is supposed to be invariably truthful may not be exactly the same. “Approaching the Organized Harem of the Octopus” is about the revolution sought for. Although the poem can be interpreted through various layers of meaning, the notion of revolution and the desire for radical changes can be one of those meaning layered in the stanzas. Even in this poem, the poet refers to the nature. The poet asks everyone to ‘plant’ the ‘banner of blood’, which is obviously a symbolic reference. Thus, all the poems explained above have a similar interest to interpret nature through the amalgamation of the voice of the Dalit. Nature for the poet is the source of strength against all his angst and disappointments. Nature contributes to the poet’s forte to fight against the people who spread hatred. Mulk Raj Anand in the introduction to the edited book of the Dalit poems, where he is also a co-editor with Eleanor Zelliot, writes:

“Let them lift their heads-up to the Sun, the Moon and the Stars, looking for light!”
(p.xvi)

This writer, here, also urges for a world, where everyone can live a life of liberty. To denote such a notion, Mulk Raj Anand also puts forward the symbolic references to the natural world. Dhasal’s hints towards nature in his poetry and the quotation by Mulk Raj Anand mentioned above tune the same. Praising Dhasal, Dilip Chitre writes in “The Architecture of Anger: On Namdeo Dhasal’s *Golpitha*”:

Even poets like Mayakovsky and Neruda mixed atrocious rhetoric with excellent poetry in similar paranoic fits, and even tremendously energetic poets like Whitman and Allen Ginsberg lapsed into prosaic verbosity when they lost control of the self-paced rhythm of their feelings. What Dhasal attempts is already major and unique enough to invoke such comparisons. What he has achieved is still a level below the best of such major poets. It is also distinctly less than what other major Marathi poets have achieved in the past and in the modern era. (p. 95)

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