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In the Organized Harem of the Octopus: Poetics and Politics of Namdeo Dhasal¹

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Abstract:

Namdeo Dhasal (1949 – 2014) is arguably one of the most significant Indian poets of the late twentieth century. This essay intends to situate Dhasal in the tradition of Marathi poetry, assess his artistic vision, and his extraordinary contribution by situating him in the development of Marathi literature and Dalit literature, both historically and comparatively. To do this the essay employs the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics developed by Yuri Lotman and the Tartu Moscow School of cultural semiotics, especially the notion of the semiosphere- the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages. Both modern Marathi poetry and the modernist poetry belonged to core minority or what Dhasal would term as the culture of ‘the three and half percent of the population.’ It is into this modernist avant-garde idiom that Dhasal translated the languages of the abject (in Kristeva’s sense) world of Kamathipura, Bumbaiya Hindi, Urdu and subverted and parodied the Sanskrit words to introduce indeterminacy and undermine not just the elitism of not just modern Marathi poetry but also the elitism of the modernist idiom, thus simultaneously continuing and subverting the Marathi avant-garde tradition. Dalit literature, particularly Dhasal’s texts, question and seek to rework what cultural semiotics would term as ‘the meta-level of the semiotic map of the culture’ produced by the core and seek nothing less than ‘cognitive restructuring’ of Marathi cultural identity, cultural memory and cultural reality in order to produce an inclusive and just society, in short, nothing less than the transformation of the existing semiosphere. The article attempts to describe how meaning generation is the ability of the part of the culture (Dhasal’s texts) as well as is the ability of the whole of culture (the Marathi semiosphere) to which Dhasal belongs. This will also help us to go beyond the restrictive distinction between poetics and cultural politics because the mechanisms that produce Dhasal’s politics are not different from the mechanisms that generate his poetic texts.

Keywords: Dalit Studies, Namdeo Dhasal, Cultural Semiotics, Marathi culture

Namdeo Dhasal (15 February 1949 – 15 January 2014) is arguably one of the most significant Indian poets of the late twentieth century. His work not only captures the predicament of what freedom, democracy and modernity meant with all its baffling contradictions and tribulations for an average Indian in the decades after the independence, but also displays brilliant poetic innovation of considerable artistic merit. The present write-up intends to situate

¹ An abridged version of this article appeared in Sahapedia.org as “A Language of Heterogeneity: Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal”. This is the complete piece with additional research.

Dhasal in the tradition of Marathi poetry, assess his artistic vision, and his extraordinary contribution. To do this we need to critically look at the development of Marathi literature and Dalit literature historically and comparatively.

Locating Dhasal Historically in the Organized Harem of the Octopus

In order to understand of evolution of Marathi poetry, it is critical to move beyond the restrictive understanding of literature as a written or printed object, the notion which seems to be a translation of the colonial notion of literature. Poetry in India implied performance, music, retelling, improvisation and transmission of texts through oral traditions. Besides, it was constituted by intensive inter-medial, cross-lingual and cross-cultural intercourse, in short, by translational activity. We also need to revise our restrictive understanding of translation and equivalence as setting up of inter-lingual synonymy hounded by questions of fidelity and freedom. This restrictive notion of translation, too, seems to be a colonial import.

It is in this context that the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics developed by the Tartu- Moscow School of cultural studies under the leadership of Yuri Lotman (1922-1993) can play a significant role. Unlike atomism and isolationism of Saussurean semiotics, this holistic framework sees the entire cultural space or ‘the semiosphere’ as Lotman (1990) calls it, instead of individual isolated languages, as the generator of meaning. Meaning generation, which is the most important question in semiotics, according to Lotman, is the ability both of culture as a whole and of its parts to put out, in the “output”, nontrivial new texts. New texts are the texts that emerge as results of irreversible processes (in Ilya Prigogine’s sense), i.e. texts that are unpredictable to a certain degree (Cited by Peeter Torop, 2005).

Semiosphere is the space outside which semiosis or generation of meaning cannot exist. The dynamic semiosphere, whose chief characteristics are internal semiotic heterogeneity, boundaries and asymmetries, generates meaning, memory and cultural innovation using translation (from one semiotic system into another relatively incompatible one- across boundaries and asymmetries) as its principal mechanism. This translation operates due to the tension between these relatively incompatible languages. Thus, translation is the mechanism underlying creative innovation. Apart from its potential in cutting across the restrictive idea of ‘literature’ as a static printed object (itself a translation of a colonial counterpart into Indian languages), into the visual, musical, performative expressions of culture, the distinctive emphasis on semiotic polyglottism, multiple cultural boundaries, asymmetries and translation in this theoretical framework makes it valuable for analysis of Indian cultural practices in general, and polyglottism, contradictions and ambiguities in Dhasal’s texts in particular. Following Lotman, we can conceptualize the Marathi semiosphere, which is a part of the ‘Indian semiosphere’, made of heterogeneous, interconnected, hierarchic and asymmetrical semiospheres of dialects, castes, villages, cities and localized spaces which in themselves are heterogeneous, asymmetrical and

hierarchic, and where each of them are both a participant in the dialogue and the space of the Marathi semiosphere as a whole.

From this perspective the works of poets like Mukteshwar, Dnyaneshwar, the Varkaris and the poets of the Mahanubhava sect which are retellings and commentaries on the classical Sanskrit texts and narratives like *the Bhagwad Geeta* and *Rukmini Swayamwar* in the language of non-literate masses that had no access to Sanskrit manuscript-based traditions can be conceptualized as translations across asymmetrical and hierarchic languages and spaces, and creative innovations at the same time. The language into which these manuscript texts were translated used primarily the folk, oral and performative meters and genres, thus shifting the space of the elite texts into non-elite spaces. After the fourteenth century the Persian and the Arabic lexis and idiom entered the language of Marathi poetry under the rule of Sultans and as a consequence of altered structure of Marathi semiosphere under the Islamic rule. There was a revivalism of Sanskritized poetics and idiom under the Brahmin rulers, the Peshwas in the eighteenth century. Brahminism of the core of Marathi literature and culture was strengthened during this period. The division and asymmetry between the core and the periphery, according to cultural semiotics, is a law of the internal organization of the semiosphere. The core generates self-description of who 'we' are and the boundary which separates 'us' from 'them'. It also generates a world-picture and a model of the universe. Lotman points out that the world-picture created in this way (by the development of the core) will be perceived by its contemporaries as reality. However, the relationship of this metalevel of the semiosphere to the real picture of its semiotic 'map' on the one hand, and to the everyday reality of life on the other, will be complex. He notes that the core where the self-description originated, the self-description in fact represents 'an idealization of a real language' then on the periphery of the semiosphere, this ideal norm will be a contradiction of the semiotic reality lying 'underneath', and not a derivation from it. "The system gains the advantage of greater structural organization", Lotman says, "but loses its inner reserves of indeterminacy which provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development (1990:128)"

The language of the modern Marathi poetry and literature was born in the late nineteenth century due to the rise of colonial education and the print capitalism when the texts from the English literature (e.g Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*) were translated into already existing Marathi producing a new hybrid idiom. This became the language of self-description of the nucleus of the modern Marathi semiosphere and the self-descriptions often were nationalistic, romantic and based on orientalist glorification of the upper-caste past. In the mid twentieth century with the poetry of BS Mardhekar (1909-1956) a modernist idiom exploded on Marathi scene. This idiom was constituted by the translation of the language of Euro-American avant-gardes like surrealism, imagism and so on into the language of modern Marathi poetry. It also questioned the nationalistic romanticism self-description by translating the dark degraded world of urban

squalor, explicit sexuality, and despair into the language of lyrical sentimentality of the culture's 'core' poetics that has dominated the modern Marathi poetry.

The Mardhekarian avant-garde tradition was continued by many major Marathi poets like Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), Dilip Chitre (1938-2009), and Vasant A. Dahake (b. 1942). It is in the space opened up by Mardhekar's radical poetics that the little magazine movement's non-conformist, urban, sexually explicit and politically charged practices such as Dalit literatures could develop. However, this modernist intervention was as much elite, Savarna and masculinist as the pre-modernist colonial modernity of earlier Marathi poetry. In the context of the Marathi semiosphere, as of many other semiospheres in India, the 'core' has been monopolized by the elite minority comprising of Savarna, upper and middle classes, patriarchal hetero-normative languages and idealized cultural spaces who have defined what Marathi culture is and "who we are" for Maharashtrians, and generated what cultural semiotics would term as 'the world picture' and the hegemonic notions of 'what reality is' for the Maharashtrians for long period of time.

Lotman's notion of asymmetry assumes not just cultural difference but also asymmetry of the flow of dialogue. He says, 'the participants in a dialogue alternately change from a position of 'transmission' to a position of 'reception' and that consequently the dialogue process consists of discrete sections with intervals between them. (143)'. This means the center and the periphery of the dialogue and consequently the semiosphere are never permanent. Direction of flow of information from centre to periphery shifts making the peripheral space as the new centre. This is what Lotman terms 'change-over between centre and periphery'. This intrinsic discreteness of the dialogue and the consequent change-over of the centre and periphery can explain the mechanism underlying the cultural politics of colonial situation, the rise of Dalit discourse or feminist or queer theory and the subsequent ambivalence and ambiguities where the predominant discourse is first absorbed, assimilated, adapted, translated and transformed during the early phase and during the later phase the peripheral spaces start 'talking back' or 'writing back' and become 'transmitters' of the discourse in their own right. One of the radical consequences of this counter discourse is the fact that what is understood as natural 'reality' is revealed as constructed by norms produced at the core.

However, one should realize that these self-descriptions (African- Americans, blacks, postcolonial subjects, other genders, Dalits and so on) which were earlier marginal and excluded from 'reality' are also *cultural spaces- semiospheres* and hence have their own internal heterogeneity and asymmetry giving rise to their internal cultural politics. For instance, the space marked as 'women' would have its internal heterogeneity and asymmetry in terms of class, race, caste or religion and the space marked as 'Dalit' would display this isomorphism of the semiosphere. Hence the paradox: on the one hand this questioning of the canon results in making those spaces which were excluded visible, at the same time, marginalizing 'others within' those spaces to peripheries in an endless spiral of the others within'. While questioning the white

supremacist construction of America, one creates ‘another’ stereotypical construction of ‘the black’ culture which would again exclude ‘others within’ in terms of class, gender or nationality and religion, making the whole process of questioning seem endless. The mechanism underlying this phenomenon of ‘endless spiral of the others within’ is the vertical isomorphism and the dynamic structure of the semiosphere.

Dalit literature in general and Dhasal’s texts in particular embody this asymmetry of ‘core’ and peripheral space as distinctive semiospheres divided by the boundaries dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’, ‘ours’ from ‘their/ yours’ and aggressively question the nature of Marathi ‘world picture’ and reality from the boundary that Dalits are relegated. They actively question the normative practices defined by the core by writing in an ‘incorrect’ ways and about the contradictory semiotic reality of the everyday and the ‘abject’ world they inhabit. If, according to cultural semiotics, the term ‘culture’ as Lotman and Uspensky (1978) implies “the *nonhereditary memory of the community*, a memory expressing itself in a system of constraints and prescriptions” whose ‘fundamental task’ is to generate structuredness and ‘*structurally organizing the world around man*, then Dalit literature in general and Dhasal’s texts in particular question and attack the givenness of this cultural memory and the generation of this structuredness as being oppressive, exclusive and cruel. Thus, Dalit literature questions and seek to rework what cultural semiotics would term as ‘the meta-level of the semiotic map of the culture’ produced by the core. Dalit literature in general and Dhasal’s texts in particular seek nothing less than ‘cognitive restructuring’ of Marathi cultural identity, cultural memory and cultural reality in order to produce an inclusive and just society, in short , nothing less than the transformation of the existing semiosphere. In the present write up, we will also try to describe how meaning generation is the ability of the part of the culture (Dhasal’s texts) as well as is the ability of the whole of culture to which Dhasal belongs. Besides, describing the meaning-generating mechanisms underlying Dhasal’s texts will also help us to go beyond the restrictive distinction of poetics and politics as the mechanisms that produce Dhasal’s politics are not different from the mechanisms that generate his poetic texts.

Both modern Marathi poetry and the modernist poetry belonged to core minority or what Dhasal would term as the culture of ‘the three and half percent of the population.’ It is into this modernist avant-garde idiom that Dhasal translated the languages of the abject (in Kristeva’s sense) world of Kamathipura, Bumbaiya Hindi, Urdu and subverted and parodied the Sanskrit words to introduce indeterminacy and undermine not just the elitism of not just modern Marathi poetry but also the elitism of the modernist idiom, thus simultaneously continuing and subverting the Marathi avant-garde tradition. His influence on the later generation of Dalit as well as non-Dalit Marathi poet is immense. Many stylistic aspects of Dhasal’s avant-garde heterogeneous, playful, alliterative, explicit and opaque rhetoric finds echoes in the linguistic flourishes of the significant later poets like Bhujang Meshram (1958-2007), Arun Kale (1954-2008), Mahendra Bhavre (b.1961) and Santosh P. Pawar (b.1972) among others of this generation.

Skeletons in the Closet of Civilization

Dhasal's life as a poet, intellectual, politician and activist is as fascinating as it is controversial. To sum up the well recounted tale, he was born in a Dalit (literally 'downtrodden', used as a preferred self-description by politically aware members of the former untouchable castes) community of Mahars in a small village of Pur-Kanersar near Pune in Maharashtra on February 15, 1949. In the fifties, he grew up in Dhor Chawl ('Dhor' caste is an untouchable caste traditionally forced into the profession of removing animal carcasses) near the infamous red light area of Kamathipura in Mumbai. His father migrated to Mumbai and worked as an assistant to a local butcher and Namdeo worked as a taxi driver. He grew up among the Dalits, migrant labourers, sex workers, pimps, their customers, lepers, smugglers, drug peddlers and petty criminals of all sorts. He brought out a collection titled *Golpitha* in 1972 named after a neighboring place in Kamathipura called Golpitha ('gol' means a 'round' structure and 'pitha' is a 'country-liquor shop'), when he was barely 23 and which can be considered one of the most important collections of poetry in the post-Independence India. A month after *Golpitha* was released on July 9, 1972; he co-founded Dalit Panthers, an organization inspired by the Black Panthers. Later, he was expelled from the Dalit Panthers on the charges of being a Marxist. In the course of his political career, his alliances shifted from the Congress to the Nationalist Congress Party and to the shock of his Leftist admirers to the Shiv Sena in the late nineteen nineties. He was awarded Padmashree in 1999 and Sahitya Akademi conferred Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004. He died on 15 January 2014 after battling cancer. His collections of poems are *Golpitha*, 1972, *Moorkha Mhatarayane Dongar Halavile*, 1975, *Priyadarshini*, 1976, *Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi?* Mumbai, 1981, *Khel*, 1983, *Gandu Bagicha*, 1986, *Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi*, 1995, *Mee Marale Sooryachya Rathache Ghode Saat*, 2005, *Gulabi Ayalicha Ghoda*, *Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee*, 2006, *Nirvani Aagodarchi Peeda* 2010. He has also written fiction *Hadki Hadavala* (1981), *Negative Space*, *Ujedaachi Kali Dunia* and non-fictional prose *Ambedkari Chalwal ani Socialists, Communists, Budha Dharma: Kahi Sesa Prashna*, *Andhale Shatak* (1995) and *Sarva Kahi Samishthi Saathi* (2003).

In an interview given to the noted Marathi writers and activists Satish Kalsekar and Pradnya Lokhande for the journal 'Anushtuba' in the special issue on Namdeo Dhasal in 1998, later reprinted in the third edition of *Golpitha* in 1999, Dhasal discusses his artistic and political vision as follows:

"My commitment is that I will express whatever contradictions are there in my political act and in my literary act with all their complexities and agonies. Earlier the structure of poetry was equal to feelings, plus imagination and composition. The academic people used to think like that. Feelings, Movement, composition, imagination plus contradictions between individual and collectivity plus the universe plus action and contradictions between all these things are important too. Poetry is reaching out into the ten thousand contradictions in the story of what is called the ten thousand years old human civilization and the life of a person who carries it. That is how I define poetry. Hence I am extremely free, with no burden, no conventions. From this point of

view I let others say whatever they like about my 'isms' and traditions, but I have this honest opinion about Dalit literature. You should go beyond the narrow concept. The term 'Dalit' is a synonym for proletarian. What a vast world you can access with this kind of vision!" (Translation mine, 128-129)

Contradictions, complexities and agony of all sorts is what one finds when one reads Dhasal poetry or considers his politics. The significance of Namdeo as a poet, thinker and politician can be grasped better in his vision of opening up of the idea of 'Dalit' beyond one's caste location into the global phenomenon of 'proletariat' with all its 'contradictions'. Ambedkarism and Marxism are often perceived as ideologically incompatible by many Dalit thinkers and politicians because the category of caste cannot be reduced to class and the religion like Buddhism is not perceived to be 'opium of the masses' by Ambedkarites. It is this opening up of the concept of 'Dalit' as it was reflected in the manifesto to the Dalit Panthers. It provided an ideological charge of being a Marxist that leading to his expulsion from the organization. Combination of the Ambedkarite ideology and Marxism enables Dhasal to not only extend the understanding of the term 'Dalit' beyond the idea of caste but also allows him locate himself and his cultural identity *critically and historically* in the complex history of the sub-continental civilization. While this tension between two dissimilar systems might have lead to marginalization of Dhasal in Dalit politics, it has provided an explosive creative dimension to his poetry. His poetry becomes a searing criticism, obviously devoid of the predisposition to glorify or romanticize the history of the Indian culture which characterizes *Savarna* view of it. Dhasal's blistering revision and interrogation of the *history* of the ancient civilization of the Indian subcontinent, called 'nation' these days, which is also 'the organized harem of the octopus', from below and from the margins is a powerful dimension of his poetic vision, as his poem 'Sthayee Dushkaalaatun' from *Murkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavla* indicates. It also exemplifies Dhasal's definition of poetry as "reaching out into the ten thousand contradictions in the story of what is called the ten thousand years old human civilization and the life of a person who carries it."

My famineous foe
A savage, retarded culture of 3000 B.C
Frolics in your potbelly,
In 1974 it has turned utterly perverse.

They call the hideousness that you are, a 'nation'
Due to the growth of the capitalist society
Otherwise who would give a fuck for you?
.....
After living in this terrifying desolate desert
When we shove our hands into the bag
Of your history and your geography,
We come across the monstrous idol

Made from billions of deceased youngsters,
 Their dead parents, their families
 Eighteen incessant worlds of their poverty
Here,
 This is my skeleton, this one is yours
 This is my father's skeleton; this is your father's
 This is your grandfather's skeleton, this, your grandmothers'

(‘Sthayee Dushkaalatna’, 7-10 translation mine)

As a poet this openness and inclusiveness allows him to access creative cultural resources from international avant-garde art movements, the resources of the established Marathi poetry and the resources available to a Marathi Dalit poet. In his poetry, this radical openness and inclusiveness is reflected in the extraordinary range of incompatible and contradictory linguistic registers, often ranging from highly Sanskritized lexis (used ironically and subversively) to the Kamathipura slang, from folk, oral and performative devices to the Western avant-garde techniques, from the mythology (in Barthes' sense) of sewage water, sex-workers, venereal diseases to the sublime terms from Buddhist philosophy, from the rhetoric of political speeches to the registers of tenderness and erotic love, from Bumbaiya Hindi to English or Urdu, from references to Bollywood to evocation of myths and legends from ancient civilizations, from registers of Bhakti to contemporary western avant-garde visual art, and from mythology of Marxism to eulogies on Ambedkar, from odes to *Gandu Bagicha* (Arsefuckers' Park) and 'Saint Faulkland Road' to a lofty ode to Indira Gandhi in a biblical style. While Dhasal does represent the poetics and politics of Dalit, what separates him from other Dalit writers is this radically innovative use of this range and diversity of semiotic registers and resources which other Dalit poets have not been able to do. Such a complex use of what Chitre calls 'bastard language' makes his poetry "complex and barely accessible to either an average Dalit listener or a highly literate reader. The surrealistic imagery and flow of his poems and his sudden but deliberate extension or orchestration of different contexts of experience baffles both the uninitiated and the literate among his audience." (Chitre, 1982). The implied reader in Dhasal's text is likewise someone like Dhasal himself who was intimate not only with the local language variety but also Indian and global artistic and political movements. This makes his texts 'obscure' and opaque for many of his readers.

This diversity, even contradictory nature of registers and devices in pastiches and parodies are obviously not merely 'verbal', formal and linguistic, but are actually *semiotic* as they go beyond the printed conception of texts into the domain of visual culture and performative practices of artistic as well as those of everyday life. Analyzing them as semiotic registers would offer us insights into the working of cultural contexts in which they are produced, circulated and read.

The Crippled Cockroach of *Karmayoga*: Poetics and Politics of *Gandu Bageecha*

Kamathipura, originally from *kamati* or *Kamathi*, which mean the construction workers, in the central Mumbai is one of the largest ‘red light’ areas on the subcontinent. It is one lane away from Dhor Chawl where Namdeo grew up. Near the first lane of Kamathipura on what is called Duncan Road is Durgadevi Park (Udyan). It was called ‘Hijra Galli’ due to obvious reasons. People call it, however, and remember it as ‘Gandu Bageecha’ or ‘Arsefuckers’ Park’. The word ‘gandu’ apart from the literal meaning carries connotations of an ‘asshole’ or a jerk. As Rishi Majmudar (2009) puts it the Hijra community near Durgadevi Udyaan or ‘Gandu Bageecha’ used to carry out their esoteric rituals including those of ‘nirvana’ or emasculation in the park. The park was then renovated and attempts have been made to ‘sanitize’ it. However it is still Gandu Bageecha for the people. While the narrator in the poem ‘Randki Punav’ in *Golpitha* describing the dance of the eunuchs in their festival of ‘Randki Punav’ is more of an objective watcher, ‘Gandu Bageecha’ becomes a full-fledged metaphor of a subversive and abject counter-space in Dhasal’s collection *Gandu Bageecha* in 1986.

‘Gandu Bageecha 2’

It is no longer the garden we knew
Mere dost
Jara bhunke de mera fata hua sa hriday....

...The worm of *karmanyewadhikaraste*
 has started nibbling at the silence
 the crippled cockroach of *karmayoga*
 Needlessly keeps digging up the soil

....it has already torn
 The *condom* of delusion
 To tatters

(Translation mine, page 22)

The words in italics are the non-Marathi words in the poem. As can be seen they come from Sanskrit and from Bumbaiya Hindi/Urdu and English. In spite of extremely competent translators like Chitre, probably due to the non-native location of the translator, the English translation of Dhasal’s poetry fails to capture the juxtaposition of such semiotic diversity or as Lotman would put it ‘heterogeneity’ of Dhasal’s text. The poem begins with the narrator’s nostalgia when the homosexual and transgender *Hijra* sex-workers would freely offer their services to the customers. ‘Digging up the soil’ euphemistically connotes the homosexual act. The attempts to ‘sanitize’ Gandu Bageecha have only ‘emasculated’ the space according to the narrator. The process of ‘sanitization’ is actually the process of Sanskritization, which according to the heart-

broken narrator is the process of emasculation and repression. Alternatively, the metaphors ‘the worm of *karmanyewadhikaraste*’ and ‘the crippled cockroach of *karmayoga*’ also suggest how it is actually the brahmanism as epitomized by *the Bhagwad Geeta* has ‘buggered’/ ‘screwed’/ or has made an asshole of the culture. The Dalit Panthers, as some people may remember, carried out the burning of the Geeta during one of their protests. ‘*Gandu Bageecha*’ is not just a metaphor but also a cultural space, a space on the periphery of not just Mumbai but also of Marathi culture as a whole, or in terms of cultural semiotics, Marathi semiosphere. In a characteristic style, Dhasal also wrote a poem called ‘The Eternal Garden and I’ in the same collection playing upon the connotations of garden and the Christian myth of the Fall from Paradise.

The juxtaposition of the incompatible Bumbaiya Hindi with Sanskrit phrases or ‘*Gandu Bageecha*’ with the Christian Paradise in a Marathi poem or surreal imagery is not an accidental or random stylistic feature, but constitutes what Lotman would term as ‘semantic tropes’ (1990). He defines the semantic trope as “a pair of mutually non-juxtaposable signifying elements, between which, thanks to the context they share, a relationship of adequacy is established” (38).” These tropes for Lotman are always semiotically bilingual constitute the essence of creative thinking and which are inherent to all creativity. A semantic trope is a mechanism for producing semantic diversity, a mechanism which brings into the semiotic structure of culture a necessary degree of indeterminacy. In Lotman’s theory, the mechanism underlying such a creative phenomenon is translation from one semiotic system into another relatively incompatible one.

The surrealistic images and metaphors such as the ones found in ‘*Gandu Bageecha 2*’ produced by juxtaposing multiple incompatible semiotic systems (languages) are very often, what Lotman (2004) calls ‘scandalizing metaphors’ which are ‘principally innovative’ and which are “treated by the carriers of traditional meaning as arbitrary and offensive to their feelings”. Such metaphors “compensate the continuous process of “aging” of the various means of meaning-generation by the introduction and use of new, previously forbidden, meaning-generating structures” (19). While theorists like Kristeva (1981:11) would say that the ‘abject’ content of Dhasal’s work, is ‘the jettisoned object, radically excluded, which draws me towards the place where meaning collapses”, Lotman would argue on the basis of his non-linear bilingual model of communication that such tense juxtaposition of the included and the excluded could bring about ‘explosive’ that is unpredictable and abrupt changes in the semiotic system (2004).

Such a juxtaposition of multiple incompatible languages in Dhasal, in Lotman’s framework, is his innovative attempt to stem “aging’ or emasculation of the poetic language under the influence of Sanskritization or Brahminization, and probably for the same reason they seem offensive and arbitrary to the traditional priests of Marathi poetry. This avant-garde technique can also be read as Dhasal’s attempt to bring about ‘explosive’ processes of cultural change by introducing unpredictable elements in the language of Marathi poetry. Thus these

semantic tropes in Dhasal's texts function to produce indeterminacy and unpredictability into Marathi semiosphere and renew hackneyed language of Marathi poetry.

In the Organized Harem of the Octopus

The rhetoric in Dhasal's texts utilizes and is produced by the possibilities and mechanisms intrinsic to the entire Marathi semiosphere. It is possible to see not just rhetoricity of his texts but also the systemic organization of the cultural space as the generator of the meaning. From this point of view, we can say that neither the 'standard' Marathi language, nor the Bumbaiya Hindi, neither the Kamathipura slangs nor the parodic use of Sanskrit can function on its own or even come into existence. The relationship between them is asymmetrical, dialogic and translational.

It is also possible to see Dhasal's texts as generated by the asymmetry, heterogeneity and the boundaries of the urban Marathi semiosphere where upper-caste 'Savarna', upper class and middle class 'white collared' ('paandhar pesha') cultural spaces have traditionally occupied the 'core' of the semiosphere relegating spaces like Dhor Chawl and Kamathipura to the boundaries and borders. This 'core' of semiosphere, as Lotman would point out, functions to generate 'self-description', 'order' and structuredness by writing grammars, codifying customs and laws. This juxtaposition of incompatible languages of Kamathipura with the idealized Savarna 'paandhar pesha' languages of self-description of Marathi culture generates rhetorical effects as well as political implications. The generation of indeterminacy in Dhasal's texts due to his innovative rhetoric revives what Lotman would term as "the inner reserves and the potential for dynamic development" of Marathi culture which have become static due to the development of the core.

The semiotically polyphonous poem titled 'Termite of Reality' from *Golpitha* illustrates this agenda of cleaning up the oppressive and hackneyed cultural forms imposed by the nuclear core, instilling love for oneself in place of self-hatred instilled by the 'savarna' cultural establishment:

Termite of Reality

The Form of the form comes into flower
At the touch of the termite of reality
We bear on our shoulders
The ocean fires (*Vadvanals*) of the *Saptarshis*
We sport the *flutes* of grass
The harems effortlessly close upon
The commands of sperm donations
Corroborating your adultery
We clean up
The darkened virtuous *forms* of God
With our tempestuous brooms

Kissing our own selves,
Embodying the primordial forms
Of brittle feelings excommunicated

(Page 61, translation mine)

The Savarna reality, which is the reality of the powerful, is incompatible with the Dalit's reality, the reality of the downtrodden and the marginal. The multiple and contradictory registers of the metaphor of harem for the elite establishment, the mythological references to Vadavanals and Saptarshis and the flute, non-Marathi words and neologisms collide to produce indeterminacy and ambiguity in not only in Dhasal's texts but in the very language of Marathi poetry. The mythology of harem is again found in the poem 'Approaching the Organized Harem of the Octopus' in *Golpitha*.

Unsurprisingly, as the Marathi semiosphere with its caste-class-gender based asymmetry, boundaries and heterogeneity has systemic counterparts in other Indian semiosphere, Dalit literature and Namdeo's texts have found resonance across the country. The organized harem of the octopus is also a metaphor for Marathi cultural, social and political establishment and a symbol for global elite political establishment, that is, not just the nucleus of the Marathi semiosphere, or even 'Indian' semiosphere but also the nucleus of the global power structure.

Apart from the heterogeneous polyglottism of his avant-garde style, Dhasal's poetry is also characterized by rich thematic and generic range. Two noteworthy genres that recur in his poetry are odes to people and erotic poetry. Apart from an excellent series of odes written on Dr Ambedkar which are collected in a single volume as *Tujhe Boat Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee*, 2006, he wrote an ode titled *Amchya Itihaasaatil Ek Apariharya Paatra: Priyadarshini* (1976) or 'Priyadarshini: An Inevitable Character in Our History' addressed to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. For many of his leftist admirers, critics and supporters, this was an act of sycophancy and opportunism as Mrs. Gandhi had withdrawn all the cases against the Dalit Panthers after the Worli riots of 1974. The poem like this is uncharacteristic of Dalit literature, and demonstrates unpredictability of Dhasal the politician and the poet. Attacking all the opponents of Mrs. Gandhi as 'fascists, the enemies of humanity and womanhood', the poem celebrates the mythology of Mrs. Gandhi as Durga created by the likes of MF Husain and compares her to Joan of Arc. The speaker in the poem, keenly aware of impending criticism of his poem, tells Mrs. Gandhi to 'Keep smiling like a green new leaf /in humble part of our hearts'. While it is easy to critique the politics and ideology of Dhasal, the poem has to be understood in its historical context. The poem was written during the tense period of Indian Emergency imposed by Mrs. Gandhi and Dhasal is trying to be a spokesperson, not of an electoral political party or the elite Left, but of the large sections of Indian society who undeniably admired Mrs. Gandhi even after her death. In an attempt to avoid the elitist view of Indian history and literature, a view taken not just by the cultural nationalists but also the socialists and the Left,

Dhasal always sought to position himself alongside the masses and look from their perspective. This long poem, unlike most of his poetry, lacks creative complexity and richness of his other collections. However, it embodies the historical tensions and contradictions of the times, and is not very far from Dhasal's own poetics and politics discussed in his interview cited above.

Gender, sexuality and eroticism is another prominent theme in Dhasal's oeuvre. Woman figures prominently in most of his works in multiple social roles and as an equivocal symbol. The collection *Chindhyanchi Devi ani Itar Kavita (2012)* is a selection of poems about women from his entire oeuvre. His collection *Khel (1983)* is sequence of poems dedicated to 'all erotic activities of men and women'. These philosophical poems in his characteristic heterogeneous style, dense surrealistic imagery and ode-like features celebrate the joys and suffering of erotic love, with all its contradictions: existential, cultural, biological. The poems are not obviously romantic in the conventional sense, as eroticism and man-woman relationship is seen through the eyes of the oppressed, deprived and stigmatized man who is politically aware of multiple inequalities, contradictions and historical ironies. However, the poems succeed due to their dense surreal imagery and deliberate ambiguity as the untitled poem translated by Dilip Chitre reveals:

The Self sheds its dead skin in water
 Again a growing creeper climbs the new skin
 The tree of yearning that begins to burn in the artificial summer
 Beyond them are your sailorly eyes and the lightning flashing in them
 And the sea arrives strolling to the shore
 Youth's butterfly floating around the bellybutton of nudity
 The white snail of your breasts crawls inside my body
 Water walks without feet

(Chitre, 2007, p 57)

While Dhasal's surreal poem talks about the possibility of erotic love rejuvenating life for human beings, we can say that the semiotic polyglottism of Dhasal's rich poetic language produced by the creative use of the plurality of cultural resources of the space where it comes from, its thematic range and the openness of his vision has shed the dead skin of Marathi poetry.

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