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From Silence to Roar in Dalit Poetry: Rage, Resilience, and Catharsis

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Abstract:

Dalit poetry is a powerful literary expression that emanates from the experiences and struggles of the Dalit community, historically oppressed and marginalised in the Indian caste system. Rooted in their lives social and cultural realities, Dalit poets use verse to articulate their anguish, resistance, and aspirations for equality and justice. These poems often reflect the unyielding anger and pain endured through generations of discrimination, providing a window into the harsh realities Dalits face. At the same time, Dalit poetry serves as a means of resistance, challenging oppressive norms and calling for social transformation. Through its profound catharsis, this genre allows Dalit poets to transcend their suffering, empowering themselves and their community with a sense of agency and pride. As a form of artistic activism, Dalit poetry continues to shape conversations on social justice and equality, leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape while amplifying the voices of the marginalised and underrepresented.

Keywords: Dalit, Marginalisation, Catharsis, Resilience, Patriarchy.

Dalit poetry's cathartic essence serves as a means of breaking the chains of oppression and reclaiming agency for a community that has endured centuries of marginalisation. It continues to be a poignant testament to the enduring spirit of the Dalit people, leaving an indelible impact on the world of literature and social activism.

*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, sister, 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 ruin to our dwelling place.
You'll beat me, break me, loot and burn my habitation.
But my friend! How will you tear down my words
planted like a sun in the East?*

-Sharan kumar Limbale

Literature has always been a weapon for resistance, change and purgation. Poetry works as an axe in cutting the tree of cultural constraints; it resists and revolts against age-old customs and traditions. Although newly acquired as a weapon for change and revolution, it serves the same age-old purpose for the cause of the subaltern whom everyone else has failed, and gives them hope, not false, but true:

*In our colony-
Reforms get confused
Paths are bruised, schemes stumble
Now- only now have boys started learning.
They write poems- stories- Indian literature
The axes of words fall upon the trees of tradition.(Meshram 10)*

Several socially conscious creative writers of the twentieth century have grappled with the inhuman social injustice of the sinful caste system and female domination. Even Shashi Tharoor, who draws a beautiful picture of India, has to write the following bitter reality in his book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*:

Despite fifty years of freedom ... caste continues to enslave village society. Each week brings a new horror story into the national press. A *dalit* woman is stripped and paraded naked through the streets of her village because her son dared to steal from an upper-caste Thakur; she is forced to have sex with the offending boy before a sneering audience of Thakurs. A high-born Jat girl falls in love with

an untouchable boy and is caught trying to elope with him; they and their accomplice, another untouchable, are caught, beaten, tortured in front of their families, and hanged, and their bodies are then burned. In one village, 22 'uppity' untouchables are gunned down in an upper-caste massacre; in another, four hundred *dalit* families are burned out of their huts daring to demand the legal minimum wage for their labours." (Tharoor 2007)

In *Dalit* poetry, anger, resistance and catharsis are shown. *Dalits* try to resist and reject the set patriarchal norms, and that resistance leads to catharsis. When other *Dalits* see that drama of exploitation and revolt, then their emotions of pity and fear are released. A. Brill, the psychiatrist who introduced the psychoanalytic techniques of Freud to the United States, prescribed that his patients watch a prize fight once a month to purge their angry, aggressive feelings into harmless channels.

The boat of marginality, *dalithood*, suppression, patriarchy and depression, the common thing between them is that of "the otherness" in the caste-dominated society. The prominent traits of resistance are *Dalit's* courage and determination in their struggle against oppression, deriving strength from their view of themselves as powerful, and the influence of realising personal experiences as the system of caste domination.

Dalit Panthers and the *Dalit Sahitya*, literature of the oppressed, give voice to the mute depressed classes. Raja Dhale and Namdev Dhasal, radical, militant panthers, are writing about Ambedkarism and Marxism. The *Dalit* Panthers, in their 1972 Manifesto, defined *Dalits* as members of SC and tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. The word *Dalit* among the *Dalit* Panthers, has a *class* content and points to the sources of *Dalit* subjugation, unlike in Uttar Pradesh, which is based purely on *caste* discrimination. Noted Maharashtrian *Dalit* writer Ganga Dhar Pantwane argues *Dalit* is not a caste but a symbol of change and revolution. The *Dalit* believes in humanism. He rejects God's existence, the soul's rebirth, and sacred books that teach discrimination, fate, and heaven because these have enslaved him. Babu Rao Bagul of the *Dalit* Panthers has also held it is a historically constructed category

through the Dalits' revolutionary struggle and connotes a desire to change an exploitative society. In the expressive poem "TheCity", Daya Pawar presents the picture of their feelings:

*"One day someone dug up a twentieth
century city
And ends of this observation.
Here's an interesting inscription:
'This water tap is open to all castes and religions
What could it have meant:
That this society was divided?
That some were high while others were low?
Well, all right, then this city deserved burning—
Why did they call it machine age?
Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century."*

In *Joothan*, too, Valmiki asserts, "Being born is not in the control of a person. Why would I have been born in a Bhangi household if it were in one's control? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country's cultural heritage, did they decide when they would be born?" (144). Many *Dalit* poets have revolted against the age-old system of exploitation, and resistance is inherent in their poetry:

*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 blood's call to arms
It won't do:
the seeds of revolution have been sown since long
no use awaiting the explosion now;
the fire-pit is ablaze; it's for tomorrow
even if you take to your heels now
no use; life's certainty is no more.*

*How will they snuff the fire within?
How will they stop minds gone ablaze?
No more reasoning now;
unreason helps a lot
Once the horizon is red
What's wrong with keeping the door open?*

(Pawar, J. V. "It's Reddening on the Horizon,")

In 1946 Mahatma Gyandas' Vivek Bhushan' published a book of poems titled '*Bharat Ke Achhut*' (India's Untouchables). These poems give expression to *Dalit* sufferings. The book of poems by Bihari Lal 'Harit', '*Azadi Ki Larai*' (The War of Independence), was published in 1947. It contains some of his most significant creations in one of which we find the lines:

*"The grandson toiled very hard to pay grandfather's debt,
The three rupees he had loaned,
Became for the Zamindar a seventy-year asset."*(Bechain)

Dalits experience burning – burning in the fire of sorrow, hatred, humiliation, injustice, inequality and untouchability – owing to their specific life experiences. The proposition is that only *Dalit* writers can authentically express their experiences. Non-*Dalit* writers can be sympathetic to the *Dalits*, they can be their well-wishers as they perceive torture and exploitation of *Dalits*, but they are not the sufferers themselves. This difference in lived experiences between *Dalits* and non-*Dalits* depicts the variation between their writings.

Many Reformers fought for the cause of subjugation; Pandit Ramabai, the outspoken Brahmin woman reformer, converted to Christianity after wrestling with Hindu society on matters concerning women's rights and Casteism. Similarly, Ambedkar talks about the consequences of the caste society:

- a) it enjoined women to burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands;
- b) it enforced compulsory widowhood on them while not insisting on the same for men;
- c) it suggested men turn ascetic and celibate; and

it recommended that men marry very young girls – child brides – to circumvent the problem of not finding mates from within their own age group (Geetha, *Patriarchy* 104).

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, the founder of the iconoclastic Self-Respect movement, was extremely critical of given notions of masculinity and argued that except for the fact of giving birth and nursing the infant in the early months, there was nothing that distinguished women from men: neither in the realm of emotions nor in the area of rational thought. Yet women were deemed subordinate, valued chiefly for their sexual allure and ability to bear children. It was because masculinity set the laws and arranged the world to the advantage of men, a historical development with immense consequences for women (Geetha 101).

Dalit women are the most oppressed and exploited because they experience subjugation, oppression and exploitation in double ways: as being women and as being *Dalit* women. *Dalit* women are doubly marginalised. *Dalit* patriarchy has also been established, in which *Dalit* men use the same mechanisms to oppress their women as high-caste women had done for ages against their women and also against the *Dalits*.

We are

Dalits for Dalits;

burdened with

womanhood and Dalit identity;

Struggling with broken wings;

crushed by man's feet;

We are

piece of flesh

only to strive;

We are

Ill-fated triply-marginalised Dalit women.

(Vaidya, Unpublished)

Patriarchal practices in India have given us a male-dominated society where the man's perceptions and mindset lay the foundation of our social order. If a man projects a woman in the position of mother or sister, she is elevated, revered and worshipped. If he sees her with lustful eyes, and his desire leads to certain consequences, she is labelled by society as the temptress, while not an iota of blame goes to him. This male-dominated projection of life has to change, and women are trying to break the silence, and they are on the way to liberation.

Violence is defined as the physical aggression of one individual or group against another or others, resulting in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering. Violence in its different dimensions is also viewed in the context of criminality.

Keshav Meshram abuses God and asks God various questions which have never been answered since ages and times immemorial; *Dalits* became silent bearers of pain and humiliation only for the sake of bread; they face every disgrace and degradation, now the poet resists every subjugation and revolts against God for every pain suffered by marginalised, he showers numberless questions upon Almighty:

*Son of a bitch! For a scrap of bread,
 Will you cut up a cartload of firewood?
 Will you wipe sweat off your emaciated body?
 To see father smoke,
 Will you accept straining?
 Your brother's your sister's muscles?
 For a gulp of his drink
 Will you go pimping?*

In Dalit poems, emotions are laid bare, and the rawness of their feelings becomes a powerful tool to challenge the status quo and demand change. By sharing their narratives of suffering and resilience, Dalit poets establish an emotional connection with their readers, fostering empathy and understanding among audiences from diverse backgrounds. This catalyses discussions on social justice, human rights, and caste discrimination.

The transformative nature of Dalit poetry lies in its ability to evoke empathy and awareness and in its role in empowering the Dalit community. By reclaiming their identity and heritage through poetry, Dalit poets instil a sense of pride, self-worth, and solidarity among their fellow community members, fostering a collective spirit of resistance and resilience.

Jayant Parmar, a Sahitya Academy Award winner, is a *Dalit* writer. He belongs to Gujrat and raises *Dalit* issues in his poetry. He has published three poetry collections, 'Aur', 'Pencil Aur Dusri Nazmen' and 'Manind'. He won SahityaAcademy Award in 2008 for Pencil Aur DusriNazmen. His oft-quoted poem, 'Manu', is a rebellious poem, where he says: "Manu, someday I would hang you by the neem tree in front of my house, totally bare. I will tear apart your veins to see how much blood of my ancestors you have drunk..."

Pawar expressed the deep agony of a Dalit poet:

A Dalit poet
Leaves several things behind;

A paper dripping wet with blood, A black sun,
On the night's head,
A river of blood,

A lantern of his ancestors, He never assaults you with Symbols,
Metaphors,

Or personalities
A heavy burden on a donkey's back, He is himself a wounded shadow
He has no existence
There is little difference
Between Him and a broken cup
He who makes images with cow-dung Has at least the sense to know
That in the hour glass
In the smell of exiled earth
In the sunflower of rebellions
In the spear of the pen and the ink And lives forever
But now he is looking for his existence He is looking for himself

He is proud to call himself
A Dalit poet.

"The Last Will of the Dalit Poet," translated by Baidar Bakht

Dalit poetry can be aptly described as poetry of catharsis, serving as a transformative medium for Dalit poets to purge their pent-up emotions, experiences, and traumas. Through the cathartic process of writing and sharing their verses, Dalit poets find solace, release, and healing from their community's historical and contemporary injustices. Writing allows them to confront and articulate the deep-seated anger, pain, and frustration that have been suppressed for generations.

Jayant Parmar paints the picture of that man who is studying, doing the job, and working with upper castes, but his inner being is depressed so much that he cannot come out of the psychological suppression and domination; he constantly sees the picture of his great grandparents who suffered from immemorial times:

*Even today
When I shine my shoes
With cherry blossom
In its shining
I see my mother's face.*

*The stink of hell pit
Dogs me
to my office.*

(Parmar, Jayant "The Stink of the Hellpit")

As an exponent of the *Dalit* voice, Bama has found in *Karukku* a suitable space to articulate the travails and sufferings of *Dalit* women. *Karukku* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil *Dalit* woman. *Karukku* means Palmyra leaf, and Bama finds many similarities between her life and the edged *Karukku*. Bama describes in the preface.

The driving forces that shaped this book are many, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these taken together. (*Karukku* xiii)

Women have no right to study the *Vedas*, so their *samskaras* are performed without *Veda mantras*. Women do not know about religion because they have no right to know the *Vedas*. The uttering of the *Veda mantras* helps remove sins. As women cannot utter the *Veda mantras*, they are as unclean as the untruth (*Manusmriti* IX). A Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya man can sexually exploit any Shudra woman (*Manusmriti* IX). In a male-dominated society, *Dalit* women suffer unimaginable oppression from the binaries of caste and gender. The laws in the *Manusmriti* and other *Vedic* scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which *Dalit* women could be uplifted. B. R. Ambedkar says in "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman" that the main cause of suffering for women in India is these so-called Hindu religious books (Ambedkar, qtd. in Agarwal, *Genocide of Women in Hinduism*). Books like *Manusmriti* divide people into a stratified caste system, promoting inequality between men and women. According to *Manusmriti*, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth. It not only justifies the treatment of *Dalit* women as sex objects and promotes child marriage but also justifies several violent atrocities on women, as seen in the IX verse of *Manusmriti*: A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him. Or a man of twenty-four, a girl of eight years of age. If the performance of his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner.

The women have to walk miles to fetch drinking water, and often the water is not safe and potable. *Dalit* hamlets are usually at the end of the main village or on the village outskirts. They live in small huts, and even the few with slightly better housing lack basic amenities such as sanitation, light and safe, clean drinking water. The women work on construction sites, carrying heavy loads of construction material. They also work in brick kilns for long hours as casual labourers to lay roads with hot tar in the burning sun, without sandals or other protective gear. The women must walk miles to collect water, fuel, and fodder for their domestic chores.

Dalit women are victims of bonded labour; they are sexually abused, exploited, humiliated and are easy targets of insult.

On her head, a burden. Her legs a-totter.

Thin, dark of body... my mother.

All day she combs the forest for firewood

We await her return.

...

Mother is gone...

Even now my eyes search for mother.

(Nimbalkar, "Mother")

Dalit poets try to peep deep into their miseries with painful hearts and observatory minds; they try to analyse deeply the difference between their identities and their superior's status:

If you were to live the life we live

(Then out of you would poems arise).

We: kicked and spat for our piece of bread

You: fetch fulfilment and name of the Lord.

We: down-gutter degraders of our heritage

You: its sole repository, descendants of the sage.

We: never has a paisa to scratch our arse

You: the golden cup of offerings in your bank

Your bodies flame in sandalwood

Ours you shoved under half-turned sand

Wouldn't the world change and fast

If you were forced to live at last

this life that's all we've always had?

(Kamble, Arun, "The Life We Live.")

Dalit literature is the literature of protest and revolt; it strongly criticises the *Vedic* literature, Hindu *Puranas* and the *karma* theory of rebirth (Joseph, "From Subjugation to Liberation," 31). It is against Brahma, and it stands against Manu, who divided human beings

based on the accident of birth. *Dalit* writers never try to depict the imaginary shades of life but show real life with real colours. Most *Dalit* writers use their language and culture to depict their experiences, as Darshana Trivedi aptly remarks:

Dalit literature is a journey from mainstream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiritual literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation. This is the 'celebration of difference'. (Trivedi, "Literature of their Own," 7)

Besides the male writers, *Dalit* women writers and writings came into existence. The women have to overcome the three problems like race, class and gender. They use various literary strategies to reject the role of the victim in these three aspects. Their writings are focused on rape, torture and suppression by the male psyche. The quest for identity is the main theme in most of the novels. Adopting a *Dalit* feminist standpoint means "sometimes losing, sometimes envisioning, the 'voice' that I had as unmarked feminists." (Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* 387-88) The literature of the feminists suggests the possibility of a shift from a male-centred *Dalit* consciousness to the development of more-feminist politics. The women are compelled to voice their misery doubled up due to caste and gender discrimination. The result is the rise of *Dalit* feminism. Namdeo Dhasal tries to depict the gloomy picture of the mind of a *Dalit* who asks numberless unanswered questions from his mother:

*A body broken down for seven generations
Gentle mother, your feet haven't travelled through the ten continents,
You never, never, never could leave your village world.*

.....

.....

*Mother you never understood:
this land does not value the woman, the Shudra, the worker, the landless.
Today your son, in his twenties, stumble-shuffling,
of whom you made an elephant from a grain of sand,
enduring the hot winds of poverty and hard times,*

*whom you fed grains of rice while your own stomach pinched,
whom you nurtured, making a lamp of your eyes and a cradle of your arms,
whom you protected in the stress of life as one protects a sore on the palm of the hand.*

(Dhasal, Namdeo, "So That My Mother May Be Convinced")

Untouchability was verdict unconstitutional in India on paper, but the people of that caste never got emancipation from the shame in practice. They continued being the burdened slaves of the upper castes because of India's hierarchal blood-sucking social system. People revolted against the atrocities and dominance time and again. We can analyse the poetry of the Indian *Dalits* against subjugation and exploitation. As in J. V. Pawar's "Birds in prison":

*Shouting slogans to condemn or uphold
a blaze of fire marches forth
And forest fires take birth
in oceans that seek to oppose.
What obstacle shall now withhold?
Our turning volcanic vein by vein
digging trenches
every inch of the terrain?*

(Pawar, J.V. "A Corpse in the Well,"41)

Anuradha Gaurav's poem "Request" refers to Hindu offering children, mostly females, to Khandoba. After becoming major, such girls are turned to devadasis, that is, prostitutes, for all convenient reasons. The poem is an open, severe attack on the devilish, unethical practice. In the end, the poet advocates:

*Don't wash the stinking rags of our lives
We are naked already.
Don't strip us in front of the whole world.*

The "Nameless One" is one of Meena Gajbhiye's poems, criticising those within the Ambedkar moment who betrayed. Now *Dalit*poets don't beg; they don't accept life as so-called laws of high castes decide it, they don't beg for the right to live, but they want to snatch it through revolution and resistance; only then can catharsis be aroused:

Begging won't get anything here
Not sympathy, not love,
A suit in court wins injustice,
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 a cinder of revolt in your own body,
"The revolution will come through poetry."

The poet speaks about the so-called rules and regulations of high-castes and says:

When there is not strength
In their own wings
They find the convenient words
To cut the wings of others.

Dalit poets are the exponents of revolt and resistance, fearlessly challenging the oppressive structures of the caste system and societal norms through their powerful verses. As articulate witnesses to the injustices and discrimination faced by the Dalit community, these poets use their craft as a potent tool to voice dissent and demand social change. Their poetry becomes a vehicle for rebellion against the profoundly ingrained caste hierarchy, exposing its inherent cruelties and advocating for dismantling oppressive systems. Through vivid imagery and poignant metaphors, they shed light on the experiences of discrimination, untouchability, and social exclusion faced by Dalits, fostering empathy and understanding among readers from different backgrounds. Dalit poets fearlessly confront the dominant narratives perpetuated by the privileged, challenging the sanitised versions of history and societal norms that have long ignored the struggles and contributions of their community. By doing so, they redefine the

narrative of resistance, shifting the focus from romanticised tales of revolution to the everyday resistance and resilience displayed by Dalit individuals and communities.

Dalit poetry asserts identity and dignity as they reclaim their voice and heritage that has been suppressed for centuries. By celebrating their unique cultural heritage, Dalit poets empower their community members to take pride in their roots and assert their rightful place in society. Through their eloquence and artistic prowess, Dalit poets catalyse social change, inspiring others to join the fight against caste-based discrimination and inequality. They pave the way for a more inclusive and just society where the voices of the marginalised are heard and respected.

In essence, Dalit poets emerge as trailblazers in the realm of literature and social activism, using their poetry to ignite the flames of revolt and resistance, illuminating the path towards a more equitable and compassionate world.

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