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The Image(s) of the Mother in Select Dalit Poems

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Abstract:

This paper reads five poems by Dalit poets (Namdeo Dhasal, Jyoti Lanjewar, Mina Londe, Waman Nimbalkar and Tryambak Sapkale), as they appear in English translation in Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot's anthology, and asks how the figure of the mother connects labour, land and history. Drawing on eco-feminist and Dalit feminist scholarship, this study evaluates the use of language, assertion of voice in each poem and then compares them. It argues that the recurring image is the mother's burdened body: she carries earth, sticks, titles and "the burden of centuries," often on land that she does not own. The poems thus turn the eco-feminist equation of woman and earth into a materialist one, grounded in labour and dispossession rather than in a natural kinship. They also complicate it. The "mother" that emerges is a composite figure in which personal grief, political agency and a historical claim to land meet, and through which these poets assert a self-hood that caste has denied.

Keywords: Dalit poetry, Mother, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Selfhood, Translation.

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Introduction

Contemporary feminist thought no longer treats motherhood as only a domestic duty. It is a site where agency, identity and labour are contested, and the ideal of selfless sacrifice that once defined the good mother is openly questioned. Marathi Dalit poetry complicates this picture: here, mothers carry earth, sell firewood and work in other people's houses, however their labor is neither freely chosen, nor starkly imposed. Whether the poems celebrate their sacrifice, condemn it, or do both, is called into question in this paper.

The mother is also an old figure for land. "Motherland," and in the Indian case, Bharat Mata, personifies the nation as a nurturing female body (Ramaswamy 1). Ecofeminist theorists such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies extend the association to the earth itself (Mies and Shiva). In contrast, critics such as Bina Agarwal insist that women's relation to nature is produced by labour and property, not by biology. Dalit writers, frequently question rather than assume national belonging, which complicates the maternal figure in Dalit poetry: she may stand for a land and a nation that has not been hers.

The paper therefore asks: how do these poems figure the mother in relation to land, labour and history, and is the mother a composite symbol of nature, nation and the Dalit self, or do the poems resist any single symbolic equation? While none of the poems discussed here bind the mother figure to the earth, each does, however draw connections whereby the mother's body is the site where unpaid labour, exclusion from land and unrecorded sacrifice accumulate. The poems differ sharply in who speaks of her, to whom, and with what demand.

The corpus under study consists of Namdeo Dhasal's "So That My Mother May Be Convinced" (1978), with his "Song of the Republic and the Dog" (1978) as a supplementary text; Jyoti Lanjewar's "Mother" (1992); Mina Londe's "Poem" (the poem's title is simply "Poem");

Waman Nimbalkar's "Mother" (1992); and Tryambak Sapkale's "Do You Want to Be a Mother?" (1976). All but Dhasal's poems are cited from Anand and Zelliot's anthology on account of their shared motif of the mother. The method of analysis is close-reading of the poems translated in English from the original: for each poem I consider the speaker, the addressee, diction and recurring images (the burden, the sari, the land), and then compare the poems on these points.

Background

Dalit Literature and the Marathi Context

"Dalit" is a self-chosen name for communities placed at the bottom of, or outside, the caste order. Marathi Dalit literature took shape from the 1960s, following B. R. Ambedkar's movement and his conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Dhasal co-founded the Dalit Panthers, formed in Bombay in 1972, and his poetry is inseparable from that militancy (Hovell 77). Limbale argues that Dalit literature takes up the issue of casteism as its source and aims at social change, not at an inherited Brahminical aesthetic (4). Michael Mahar pits the old dharma against the new dharma. The former is rooted in Hindu religious thought and the latter draws on the Constitution. This distinction entails a clash between an inherited, unequal caste-stipulated duty bestowed by the religion and a modern, constitutional obligation made secure by rights (Mahar 17). Earlier, Dalits, the "Agents of Dharma" (Mahar 17), occupied a paradoxical position in the *dharmic* cosmic order which needed the untouchable to maintain its ritual purity, but required him to stay at a distance. In a democratic state devised by the constitution, Dalits could assert themselves as equals in a sovereign state which promises mobility for everyone.

The poems studied here are English translations of Marathi originals, and the anthology credits each to a translator. The questions of sound, metre and idiom lie beyond the scope of this paper, because their essence may register differently in the original Marathi.

Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism and Dalit Women

Ecocriticism examines how a culture represents nature and how those representations shape its relation to the environment (Nayar 328). Ecofeminism adds that the domination of women and of nature are linked, and it often associates women's reproductive capacity with the earth's fertility (Mies and Shiva 240-41). Critics have disparaged this association for it's essentialism. Agarwal argues for a "feminist environmentalism" (119) in which women's relation to nature arises from a gendered division of labour and unequal access to resources, not from any natural kinship. That distinction matters for these poems, in which the mother's tie to the earth is first of all a tie of work.

Dalit feminist scholars add a further qualification: Dalit women face caste and patriarchy together, and their experience differs both from that of upper-caste women and from that of Dalit men (Rege WS40). Any literature that claims to record the lives of Dalit women must indicate these differences, so that the representation may be adequate.

The ecological stakes for Dalit communities are likewise material. Dalit communities are deprived of land and dignity, relegated to the positions of sweepers and cleaners. Ambedkar regarded the village as an instrument of caste oppression and urged Dalits to leave it (Zelliot 12); an uncomplicated harmony with nature is therefore not a safe premise. The work of Ramachandra Guha and Martínez-Alier on the "environmentalism of the poor" (3) suggests the more useful frame: poor communities defend access to land, water and forest because their livelihoods depend

on them. Conservation can also be turned against such communities. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* dramatises the forced eviction in 1978-79 of refugee settlers, largely from Dalit castes, from Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans in the name of protecting tigers, which shows how a conservationist discourse can serve exclusion. Environmental concern, in other words, cannot be sorted neatly into a privileged and an unprivileged position.

The Mother as Nation and as Psyche

The Bharat Mata figure joins nation, land and the maternal body in a single image (Ramaswamy 1). Dalit writing often contests that image, asking which people the nation-as-mother nourishes. Psychoanalytic studies of Indian family life (Kakar) describe an intense and ambivalent bond between son and mother, who is at once the source of nurture and the focus of anxiety. I use this as a hypothesis, not a premise: the question is whether the speakers who are sons are projecting their own identity crises onto the mother. The pun '(m)other' draws on Simone de Beauvoir's contention of the Other which marks the mother as both intimately-near and socially-made other.

The Poems

Namdeo Dhasal

Dhasal's "So That My Mother May Be Convinced" is spoken by a son, and its title announces a persuasion. It opens on a "body" that is "broken down" in travelling from continent to continent and homesick for the "village world" that was its home, where it inherited the titles "Devout Wife," "Chaste Wife" and "Married Woman" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 8). The poem treats these titles as patches over poverty, illusory reasons for pride whose weight finally became unbearable. The son recalls that he was "made an elephant from a grain of sand" while his mother

stood the "hot winds of poverty" and nurtured him in the "cradle of *her* arms" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 8). The "grain of sand" referred to here is the mother's labor (pun intended) which is contrasted with his elephantine growth. This polarity isn't innocent: the mother's effort is measured against her son's growth.

The poem's address is its most striking feature. The son speaks to "you," moving from tenderness as in "How many wishes, how many hopes, were in your mind" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 9), to reproach, for she has let the curtain fall easily "over the atrocities of those long years" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 9), and then to instruction. He praises her "fearlessness," "willing drudgery" and "accomplishments" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 9) and calls her fearlessness *natural*. That one word shows the risk Agarwal identifies: if the mother's endurance is natural to her, her labour disappears as labour (120-21). The turn comes when the son says that all this changed after Man "came to know the *mis*use of land," which left the mother a "machinery" and stripped her of her identity (Dhasal, "Convinced" 9). This is the poem's strongest ecological claim, and it is causal and material: the mother's degradation is coterminous with the exploitation of land.

The son's own demand is more troubling. He keeps a weapon because it "increases respectability," and he needs her "faith" and her "sacrifice" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 9). He tells her of massacres across the country that she cannot know of, since she did not "moo once" and the "earth" did not "crack" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 10). The animal and the earth are both silent beside her, and her silence is at once what he honours and what he blames. In the closing lines, he reassures her of his strength for revolution and asks that she not "crumble to dust at this crucial moment" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 10). The revolution he promises depends on the mother's continued compliance. The poem thus holds the tension aforementioned:between praise of sacrifice and its exposure.

In “Song of the Republic and the Dog”, the ‘patched’ and ‘worn-out’ sari of the mother underwhelms, and the speaker then asks ‘the worth of breast milk’ (Dhasal, “Republic” 4). The nation appears here as a mother figure whose nourishment is probed with skepticism. In both poems, the son looks toward a *new world*, and the image implies that the existing country, for all its diversity, has no room for the “*dalit* in the Republic” (Dhasal, “Republic” 5) he speaks for.

Jyoti Lanjewar

Lanjewar’s “Mother” opens with “gold-bordered saris,” “a gold necklace” and “gold bangles,” not as the mother’s possessions but as signs of the ease that she was “never seen” to know (Lanjewar 99). What the poem gives her instead is work: the soles of her feet bear the “harsh summer sun,” she puts her “little ones in a cradle” to rest, and she carries baskets of earth on her head, “working, working, working . . . building a dam on a lake” (Lanjewar 99-100). The triple repetition enacts the endlessness of the labour. The mother builds a dam, a large public work, yet dreams only “of four mud walls,” and the gap between what she builds and what she hopes for is the poem’s quiet statement about landlessness.

The sari here is not an emblem of national culture. It is patched and worn. In the evening, the mother undoes it’s knots to take out her small earnings and buy what the household needs, including her child’s health, pleasure and education (Lanjewar 100). It does not diminish her pride, and she holds on to “the end of *her* sari” when disrespected. At the close, she never wanted “a new broad-bordered sari” (Lanjewar 103), so that her refusal of display reads both as dignity and as deprivation.

Lanjewar’s mother is also a political agent, and this separates her from Dhasal’s. She tells her son to “become an Ambedkar and let the baskets fall from *her* hands” (Lanjewar 100). Her

hope for liberation is tied to his education and leadership. She joins protests, and even when her only son is martyred, she says that she would have all her sons die for the cause of "Bhim" (Lanjewar 102). What the poem offers is not Mother earth, but a woman who moves earth for wages. Regardless, the poem also celebrates sacrifice, and one must ask whether Ambedkarite heroism reinstalls the self-effacing mother. The fact that the poet is a woman keeps that question open rather than answering it.

Mina Londe

Londe's "Poem" is the angriest of the five. Its speaker has carried the "burden of centuries" on her back and still cannot claim "this muddy piece of land" (Londe 109). History bears no "footprints" of Dalit movements, despite their many martyrdoms and sacrifices (Londe 109). The demonstrative "this" and the adjective "muddy" make the land humble and immediate: a piece of ground and not a landscape. The poem ends by asking, "If the earth is not ours / How can we speak of the sky?" (Londe 109). The question turns the usual order of aspiration upside down: the sky stands for the larger claims of citizenship and dignity, the earth for the barest ones, and the poem insists that the second must come first.

The voice of the poem is collective ("ours," "we"), and in the lines quoted here no mother is named. Londe's poem plainly states what other poems in this study merely imply: that the land which the mothers work is not held by their communities. It also contests the Bharat Mata idea from within, since a motherland that is not "ours" cannot be a shared mother.

Waman Nimbalkar

Nimbalkar's "Mother" is an elegy. The mother is "a dull shadow," and "as she walked, the burden on her head shook, shifted" (Nimbalkar 121). She is bitten by "a huge black snake" and dies, deaf to the priest's incantations and the pleas of her wailing children (Nimbalkar 121-22). The grieving poet seeks the dim image of the mother who fed and sheltered them with the money she earned selling sticks, though she was herself a stick-like figure (Nimbalkar 121-22). Her body and her merchandise resemble one another, so that labour on the land's margins has worn her into its likeness. The metaphor of the "shadow" here, are remininscient of Mina Londe's missing "footprints": both describe lives that leave no record.

The failure of the priest's incantations may suggest that the religious order offers the mother no protection. However, this is an inference from the summary above and should be tested against the full poem. The poem does not tie the snake to deforestation or to any named external force. Nor is the mother's death to be read as an allegory of environmental destruction. What the poem portrays is the vulnerability of a woman who earns her living outdoors, and a grief that is personal first.

Tryambak Sapkale

Sapkale's "Do You Want to Be a Mother?" is the only poem of the five whose title is itself an address and a question. It presents motherhood as something one might choose or decline, speaking directly to the question with which this paper began. The poem lists the three defining tenets of Hindu philosophy which rely on abstractions, not lived experiences of the mother figure. Unfortunately, the ideals fail to hold up except as "pegs" on which the "shabby tent" (Sapkale 153)

of high religious idealism is built. The translator's note speculates that the image of the shabby tent may connote the tent of a wandering prostitute. The marginalised women became Devadasis because of their position as the lowest among the lowest. Calling it a "shabby tent," Sapkale strips away any false glamour or agency from the trade. It represents an unstable, temporary, and precarious existence where a woman's body is commodified for the survival of a broken structure. Sapkale invites the woman who never got to "become a mother" to break the shackles that lopsided religious fanaticism subjects her to: he is "ready to be adopted" (Sapkale 153). Atma, Parmatma and Parbrahma taken together, symbolise the mother figure looked upon as nourishing. However, when these precepts turn dogmatic, they no longer nurture. The system refuses to see the mother as a fostering respectable figure.

Comparing the Mothers

The poems differ first in voice and address. Dhasal's son speaks to the mother in the second person and rebukes her; Lanjewar's poem narrates her actions in the third person and lets her speak her one injunction; Nimbalkar's elegy speaks of her after her death, in search of her image; Londe's speaker is collective and, in the lines quoted, addresses neither a mother nor a son. Sapkale's portraiture simultaneously holds up and breaks the image of the mother. He asks that the society and its false ideals die out for the mother to emerge.

The poems converge on the image of the burden. Dhasal's mother bears the weight of the titles and the "hot winds of poverty" (Dhasal, "Convinced" 8); Lanjewar's carries baskets of earth (Lanjewar 99-100); Nimbalkar's has a burden on her head (Nimbalkar 121); Londe's speaker carries the "burden of centuries" (Londe 109). In each case, the load is both literal and historical. The image of the sari appears only in Dhasal and Lanjewar, where it is patched and worn. Land in

both the poems, appears as workplace or as denied possession: the earth in Lanjewar's basket, the "muddy piece of land" in Londe, the "misuse of land" in Dhasal, the sticks in Nimbalkar.

The poems also differ in how they treat sacrifice. Dhasal's speaker demands sacrifice; Lanjewar's mother chooses it for a cause, and the poem honours her; Nimbalkar's mother is spent by labour and dies unprotected. Taken together, the poems do not endorse or reject self-sacrifice. They show that it can be an instrument of domination, a form of political agency or a simple consequence of poverty, depending on who is speaking.

Gender complicates this further. Dhasal and Nimbalkar, as sons, speak of mothers; Lanjewar and Londe are women poets. Rege warns that Dalit women's experience is not captured by speaking on their behalf, and Dalit women's own life-writing offers a counterpoint in which women speak of mothers and of one another in the first person. The mothers are figures made by poets, not testimonies.

What, then, of the composite symbol? The mother is not a stable symbol of earth, nation or the Dalit self. She is the figure in which three registers meet: personal grief (Nimbalkar), political agency and its costs (Lanjewar, Dhasal), and a historical claim to land and record (Londe, Dhasal). The ecofeminist equation of woman and earth survives only in a materialist form, as labour on land that is not hers. The projection of anxiety onto the mother is clearest in Dhasal, where the son's revolutionary anxiety is placed on her silence, and much less so in Lanjewar, where she is the one who acts.

Conclusion

Read in juxtaposition, the poems in question use the mother's body as the place where labour, land and history are felt: she carries earth, sticks, titles and centuries. In most of the poems,

the mother labors on ground that is not hers. The eco-feminist link between woman and earth is thus recast as one of work and dispossession. The claim to selfhood each poem makes through the mother, is bound up with a claim to land and to a place in the record. The poems withhold easy celebration, complicating sacrifice which is directed toward the motherland which excludes them.

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