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## The Dalit Speaks: An In-depth Analysis of Selected Marathi Poems Translated in English

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### ABSTRACT

The word Dalit has its roots connected to Marathi language and culture. Dalit literature written in Marathi therefore holds great significance. Given the case that many Dalit writers wrote their narratives originally in their native language, translation has made it possible for Dalit literature to be consumed by audiences worldwide. Among many other channels for expression, poetry has remained as a popular medium for Dalit writers to reflect a piece of their lives which otherwise went unnoticed in the eyes of the privileged or the higher castes. In relation to the above, the current research paper will attempt an in-depth analysis of selected poems of the Dalit poets: Daya Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal; whose works are translated from the Marathi language to the English language. In the above attempt the pertinent point of the necessity of the Dalit to speak out in order to tell their own distinct stories by themselves will also be addressed in relation to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's riveting essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*.

**Keywords:** Dalit poetry, expression, oppression, resistance, aesthetics, language.

The word Dalit has its roots connected to the Marathi language and culture. Dalit was derived from the original word *Padadalit* which translates to slave at one's feet. B. R Ambedkar used Dalit as a term for the first time in 1931 at the signing

of the Poona Pact. Later the term got picked up massively during the Dalit Panther Movement (DPM) in Maharashtra. Dalit literature written in Marathi therefore holds great significance.

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However, it is only in the recent years that Marathi Dalit literature is being circulated in the language of globalization i.e., English. Poetry has remained as a popular medium among the Dalit writers to express themselves, to rebel, to show resistance and to reflect a piece of their lives which otherwise went unnoticed in the eyes of the privileged or the higher castes. While keeping a context of all that is mentioned above, the current research paper will attempt an in-depth analysis of selected poems of the Dalit poets: Daya Pawar and NamdeoDhasal; whose works are translated from the Marathi language to the English language. In the above attempt the pertinent point, of the necessity of the Dalit to speak out in order to tell their own distinct stories by themselves will also be addressed in relation to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's riveting essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

The Dalit Panther Movement (DPM), mentioned at the beginning of the paper, has strong connections with Dalit literature. DPM was inspired by the Black Panther Movement initiated by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in America. Besides, Dalit Panther Movement had strong influences of Marxism, Buddhism, Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkarite thought. NamdeoDhasal was one of the founding members of DPM. He considered Dalit to be a caste of the exploited and thus included in it "all those sections of society who are marked by social, economic and cultural exploitation." (Limbale). Many Dalit writers did not accept this definition of the Dalit given by Dhasal. And consequently, such differences of opinion lead to the dissolution of the Dalit Panther Movement in 1977.

Nonetheless it is imperative to note that the Dalit writers who were a part of the DPM used a peculiar style of writing known as "Pantheri." This can be predominantly seen in the poetry of NamdeoDhasal. Unlike V.V Shirwadkar, P.L

Deshpande, Mangesh Padgaonkar and many more renowned Marathi poets, NamdeoDhasal did not write poetry for mere aesthetic entertainment. Rather he wrote poetry to reflect the lives of the Dalit, who to say were a part of the society but never fully accepted as fellow human beings.

*Down a pint of the cheapest Dalda*

*...Make them ride naked on a donkey through the streets to shame them*

*...One should open the manholes of sewers and throw into them*

*Plato, Einstein, Archimedes, Socrates,*

*...And keep them rotting there with all their words*

*...Let all this grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up*

*And burst at a nameless time to shrink*

*After this all those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others their slaves...*

Above is an excerpt from *Man, You Should Explode* by NamdeoDhasal. From this poem it can be gathered very evidently that Dhasal is angry with the situation of the Dalits in India. But what is interesting to observe here is that he expresses his anger in an everyday language that surrounds him. He gives references to everyday things such as the cheap substitute ghee, *Dalda*, to accentuate the distance that exists between the lower and the higher castes lives. He asserts his identity as a Dalit poet through a language that people consider vulgar and uncivilised. By adopting such a style of writing he rejects the upper caste style of writing which is deeply embedded and established in the literary space.

*Stonemason give stones dreams to dream;*

*...By the bodies of four women*

*Bent like bows.*

*...stonemasons mix blood with stones;*

*I carry a load of stones*

*Stonemasons build*

*A stone house.*

*I break heads with stones.*

The above excerpt is from *Stonemasons, My father and Me* by Namdeo Dhasal. This too, like most of his poems, is written in free verse. The imagery involved in it is not to satisfy the aesthetic taste of the reader but to evoke a sense of pain, in order to make the reader aware of the gruesome nature of the Dalit lives. The poem is ruled by reality and not by imagination. This in fact is one of the most striking features of Dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature* addresses this difference that exists between the Dalit literature and the literature produced by the upper castes by remarking that "If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna literature, pain or suffering is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature."

*I, in my white shirt*

*Am split like Jarasandha.*

*Like two morsels of food*

*Thrown in opposite directions, for spirits.*

*...The prison clock strikes five*

*A command to leave?*

*Where do I live?*

*Like a guttersnipe*

*Rattling in muck-*

*In our slum...*

The above is an excerpt from Daya Pawar's poem *I, In the white shirt*. In it a split of consciousness can be seen in the speaker. It appears that in spite of getting a white-collar job the speaker is still unable to escape from his caste identity as a Dalit. It almost seems like a PTSD that he suffers from. Thus, at this point it becomes imperative to understand why a difference between Dalit writing and Savarna writing exists.

Nobody but only a Dalit will best be able to describe his/her/their experiences as a Subaltern. If anyone else attempts to write for them, the writing produced will be based on a second-hand experience and imagination. No matter how closely they may have observed the lives of the Dalit they would never be able to feel it completely because they are not the subject of it. Jotting down of an authentic experience can only be expected to be aroused from a Dalit consciousness. Hence it is very important for the subaltern to speak out, to put forth their own experiences through the writings of themselves. It is also necessary to acknowledge here that since the very life experienced by the Dalit is remarkably different from that of the *Savarnas*, the literature produced by them will definitely not be the same as the upper caste writers. Consequently, Dalit writers knowingly or unknowingly will deviate from the accepted and established style of writing.

*I have seen this tree trembling in grief*

*Like Bodhivriksha its roots have gone deep,*

*...Every branch laden with a crutch*

*Untouched by death, it goes on enduring the agony of dying*

*I have seen this tree trembling in grief.*

The above is an excerpt from the poem *Tree* by Daya Pawar. In it, human dignity and the enduring nature of the Dalit is highlighted by

creating an allusion of the Bodhivriksha tree under which Buddha had attained enlightenment. This poem helps in grasping the nature of Dalit poetry; it is not only restricted to the portrayal of the hardships and the struggle of its people but Dalit poetry also acts as a potent medium to spread the Ambedkarite thought rooted in the teachings of Buddhism.

Likewise, Dalit poetry takes significant action to decolonize Marathi literature that circles around the upper class and the middle-class issues such as child marriage, widow remarriage, women's education, dowry system, etc; taking a turn from these, Dalit writers introduce themes that are untouched like their caste itself. Additionally, they dismiss "the aesthetic concepts of Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram" (Limbale) of the so-called "standard" Marathi literature. In lieu Dalit writers choose to focus on life-affirming qualities and embrace humanism as the true core of their writing.

Given the case that many Dalit writers wrote their narratives originally in their native language or mother tongue, translation has made it possible for Dalit literature to be consumed by audiences worldwide. Dalit literature is no longer restricted to the Indian subcontinent but is open for interpretation and drawing parallels between other marginalized communities who have also been the subject of humiliation and oppression of the supposedly civilized. It is noteworthy that Dalit literature and African American literature in the form of stories, novels, poems and folksongs have a lot in common, however the only irony here is that the Blacks and the Whites belong to different racial groups, while the untouchables and the *Sarvarna* do not.

Thus, on a concluding note, it can be said that Dalit poetry is a symbol of courage, self-expression and resistance. Being a testament of its own, Dalit poetry by no means can be measured with the

same standards and expectations that one holds for Indian literature in general. Time and again the appropriateness of Dalit literature produced by writers such as Daya Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal is questioned and ridiculed. But one needs to develop an understanding that the purpose, form and language of Dalit literature is not the same as others because it is not just for mere aesthetic entertainment. When an understanding like this will be developed, only then one will be able to appreciate Dalit literature in its truest sense without any prejudice.

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