

Assertion of Self: A Reading of Selected Marathi Dalit Poets

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The image of burning *Manusmriti* 25 december 1927 taken from: www.google.co.in

Abstract

This paper is devoted to analyse the selected poems by Marathi Dalit poets who incorporate frustration, depression, irritation, etc., in their poems as the emerging themes. The paper identifies how in post-Ambedkarian era, Dalits have tried to assert their identity in various quarters of life: politics, religion, education and economics.

Key words: *Manusmriti*, Dalit literature, Ambedkar, Self-identity, religious structure

Meaning of Self within Hindu Tradition

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To begin with, it is important first to understand the meaning of the Self which varies from culture to culture and circumstances to circumstances. The Vedic tradition, which is dominant even today, takes Self as holy, free from all the bondages, caste, creed, race and gender. It is unaffected by any natural and physical obstacle, it is immortal, and mover of body. If it comes out from the gross body, all five elements which constitute the body, amalgamate it in nature and the soul acquires a new garb. To quote from the *Bhagvad Gita*:

vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya

navani grihnati naro parani

tatha sarirani vihaya jiranny

anyani samayati navani dehi

Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new. (Krishnan 108)

Denying Dalits to Possess Self

Contrary to this, Dalits since ages were deprived of Self. Religion was alien for them and so were its benediction. They were haunted by fear of pollution and abomination. When one peeps in the pre-Ambedkarian India, the condition of Dalits was miserable. The Manuvadi philosophy of culture and society didn't allow them to stand on the platform of human beings. Divested of humanity and there by Self (I, MY, ME, WE, OUR, US) Dalits, galvanised by Ambedkar's ideology and bolstered by self-confidence, tiedy to make their presence felt in all quarters of life. In this way they not only subverted their chattel like status but also established rather stalwartly their presence with dignity as is revealed in the following analysis.

Dalit Literature

Dalit literature which presents and discusses the agonies and sufferings of the ages was not considered in the main stream of Indian literature. But with the passage of time, Dalit Literature has grown up with its bones and muscle getting stronger in Marathi and many other Indian languages.

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In the second half of twentieth century where the male Dalit writers in Marathi like Namdeo Dhassal, Arjun Dangle, Arun Kamble, Prahalad Chendwankar, Waman Kardak, Yashwant Manohar, Tryambak Sapkale, J.V. Pawar, Omprakash Valmiki including many others cultivated the field of Dalit literature with their bitter experiences.

The female Dalit writers like Hira Bensode, Min Gajbhiye, Anuradha Gaurav, Jyoti Lenjwar, Mina Londe, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and others have contributed equally, and their writings have acquired a comprehensive place in university curriculum. In this connection Eleanor Zelliott remarks: “A new school of Marathi literature, Dalit Sahitya, arose over two decades ago to express the thoughts and record the lives of ex-Untouchables. The voices of women have recently joined the dozens of male voices that have added a new dimension to the literature of western India” (Feldhaus 65). It has stamina to stand in parallel with literature of other marginalised communities such as Afro-Americans and Native Americans.

Dr. Ambedkar, Dalit Conversion and Dalit Literature

During the post-Independent era, Dalit literature got impetus under the towering figure: Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar who is acknowledged as MAHA MANAV, MESSIAH and MODERNIST. He brought a renaissance in the thought of modern generation in general and of dalits in particular. Dalit conversion into Buddhist opened a new gateway to get emancipation from traditional legacy, which they had been bearing for centuries. According to Sharankumar Limbale, “the first mass conversion of Dalits took place on 14 October 1956, and the first literary conference of Dalit writers was held on 2 March 1958. Significantly, it was called a conference of Dalits rather than Buddhist literature” (Limbale 41).

This conversion was a milestone for Dalits in their long and arduous journey of acquiring a new Self. This Self had no fear of polluting anyone. In other words, rejection of Hinduism at large and acceptance of Buddhism in particular was a bold declaration of their newly acquired Self like status. In 1949 Dalit writers established an organisation, Dalit Sevak Sahitya Sangh, on the insistence of Appasaheb Ranapise. In 1950, its name was changed to Dalit Sahitya Sangh and ultimately on 11 March 1960 it was altered to Maharashtra Buuddha Sahitya Parishad. Discussion of Dalit literature began during the period from 2 March 1958

to 11 March 1960. In this way Dalits, defied the barriers imposed on them and asserted their identity in the field of education and literature.

Literature as Tool to Fight Against Caste Atrocities

Literature became one of the major weapons to fight against atrocities inflicted by upper caste. Dalit writers took literature as Omprakash Valmiki defined it:

Literature is that discourse which stands on the side human being who is oppressed, who is in great peril, who wants to live. Literature should infuse him with the urge to live. Literature should shake him up, teach him to do battle, not weaken him, not make him submit to hegemony, not enslave him. We need to free ourselves from the social order surrounding us. For me, good literature that which wakens us towards that freedom.” (Valmiki 137-138)

Literature did for Dalits, what it did for Indian freedom struggle. Their struggle is to get the answers for surging questions in their heart and mind. Their effort is to get self-identification on the human platform. They too, want to take fresh air in the azure sky where there is no smell of discrimination, marginalization and exploitation.

A Study of the Selected Poems of Select Dalit Poets

Here, in this paper the focus is concentrated on the selected poems of Namdeo Dhassal, Arun Kamble and J.V. Pawar, who struggled to establish their identity in the cultured and literate society via poetry. In this context, Mulk Raj Anand states, “The process of poetry arising out of the cry can be felt in most dalit poems, because in these utterances protest seems to come from the insulted and the injured, who have laboured for generation for supers, their hands with dirty work” (Anand xi). Their sufferings and pains are fore-grounded in the tropes, similes and metaphors used in the poems.

Namdeo Dhassal



Courtesy: <http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/marathi-poet-dalit-panthers-party-founder-namdeo-dhasal-passes-32498.html>

Namdeo Dhasal (1949- 2014), founder of Dalit Panther was one of the major poets who struggled for emancipation from the social taboos. He associated his poetry with politics. For him, “poetry is politics,” he told the photographer Henning Stegmuller, “I enjoyed discovering myself. I am happy when I am writing a poem, and I am happy when I am leading a protest of prostitutes fighting for their rights” (Dhasal n.p.). In the poem, “Leaving the House,” the poet wants to find out reasons behind the multiplication of their “hunger death”, “slum”, “Beggars”, “men without work” etc. Here, as a social leader, he tries to find the solution of the problems, because these phrases have become transferred epithets for the inherited identification. His heart aches to behold the fast increasing worse condition of untouchables. He wants a new platform to give them shelter, free from inhuman society. This poem enshrines the queries:

Tell me I’m yours. Say I’m yours.

Why don’t you say something? Why don’t you say something?

Look, We have brought new brand slate with us.

Give me an answer: answer me; give, I say.

Prostitute multiply:

Question mark question mark Question mark

Hunger death multiply:

Question mark question mark Question mark

Beggars multiply:

Question mark question mark Question mark

Men without work multiply:

Question mark question mark Question mark

Why do question multiply, multiply: question:

Why wasteland: Why more wasteland? (Anand 50-51)

The assertion of the phrase “Question mark” refers to the poet’s anxieties to come out from the web of the multiplication of perplexities and to stand with his own people. Dalits have been facing these problems for centuries, but now they have lost the patience, so the poet says:

you will be given only three minutes

Speak

Speak speak

Speak speak speak. (Anand 51)

Repetition of the word “speak” refers to zero degree tolerance power. His irritation has been converted into the aggressive and abusive language:

O.K.

We’re turning our backs on you right now.

Right now we’re becoming assassins

taking off even the doors as we leave,

running war- tanks over you

Spit on you; I Sit on you: Spit! Spit! Sky Us. Sky. Us.(Anand 51)

As the above analysis reveals, Dhassal, via his poetry, has acquired a unique self which is ready to fight. Indeed, it is a marked improvement on the state of passivity in which dalits were enchained for centuries.

Sunflower

In another poem, “NOW, NOW,” the poet, addressing their messiah, Babasaheb Ambedkar, expresses his utmost desire to migrate from ignorance to enlightenment, where they can visualise themselves. The centuries-long burdens would be removed there. They are thankful to destiny that they have been “blessed with a sunflower-giving *fakir*.” He was the first who was intellectually and politically strong who empowered dalit society. This is the reason, he is adored even today. To quote his own words:

Turning their backs to the sun, they journeyed through centuries:

Now, now, we must refuse to be pilgrims of darkness.

That one, our father, is bent for carrying,

carrying and darkness. Now, now we must lift that

burden from his back.

Our blood was spilled for his glorious city

And what we got to eat was right to eat stones.

Now, now, we must explode that building which kisses the

Sky!

After a thousand years we were blessed with a

Sunflower-giving *fakir*;

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

The metaphor of sunflower reminds the readers of the image of a sunflower and its seeds. As seeds are buried in the soil and with the proper nourishment they come out and blossom in sun light, so did Dalits. Under the shade or shadow of Babasaheb, Dalits found

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conducive environment to nurture their Self. Now, they are tired of bearing the burden of untouchability hence their new Self urges them to move forward and help each other in gaining fulfilment.

Mother's Role

“SO THAT MY MOTHER MAY BE CONVINCED.....,” is one of the most powerful poems of Dhassal, states the same newly acquired self which is bent upon revolting. Here, the poet is searching his own identity as well as of mother's who has been buried under the tradition. Generally, a woman has to play three roles in her life: a daughter, a wife and a mother. Woman is considered as synonym of sacrifice. In all the three forms, she performs prescribed duties. As a wife and mother, her responsibilities multiply. Her prime time is devoted to the service of a family. The expectations laid out for a woman in her family are in abundance. In the words of the poet, “without speaking, you look like heirloom mental of Chaste wife” (Anand 60). She puts a lot of patches on heart. She is exhausted due to unbearable burdens of the gender and caste. He is reminded of the bygone days when his mother used to feed him and her own stomach would ache. Addressing his mother, he asserts:

In your prime, you became weak, naive, a tethered cow.

Mother, You never understood:

This land does not value the woman, the sudras, the worker, the landless.
(Anand 60)

Here, Dhassal rises beyond his caste and recognizes other oppressed communities as women, poor people and workers. The acknowledgement of these victimised communities also imparts a unique Self along with sudras. By recording the sacrifices of his mother, Dhassal secures a human like self for her as well.

Arun Kamble



Courtesy: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f9/Arun_Kamble_3.JPG

Arun Kamble (1953-2009) was one of the founding members of Dalit Panther movement. He struggled to acquire dalit identity on national political level, and he gained success. He served as a secretary of Janta Dal, a member of the National Election Committee and in charge of Bihar State in the reign of then prime-minister Vishwnath Pratap Singh. He, as the president of Dalit Panther, led the Namantar Andolan very successfully which was a sixteen years long dalit campaign to rename Marathwada University as B.R. Ambedkar University. His objective was to make dalits aware of their rights. Along with his social and political efforts, he endeavoured to get justice for his community by the virtue of his pen. Soaked in the sweat and blood of segregated dalits, his pen inscribed their agonies on the paper in the form of poetry and prose.

Kamble's Speech

“Speech” can be taken as a starting point for discussion. It encapsulates the poet’s controversial ideas regarding the speech that arises in his mind. He finds himself between what tradition has taught and what is required today. On the one side, the tongue is twisted to the past and on the other side it is difficult to embrace new one:

Bone chewing grampus

at burning ghat

permanent resident
of my heart
with weight of tradition
behind his back
yells, “Sadding bastard, I
tell you
stutter with our tongue!” (Anand 85)

Further, the Brahman teacher argues for the adoption of sugar-coated tongue from the *Vadas* in very abusive manner. To quote:

Picking through the *Vadas*
buttering his queue
Brahman teacher at school
bellows, “Speak my pure tongue,
whoreson!” (Anand 85)

Arguing for the “Privilege” of Human Rights

This was the fact that Dalits were not allowed to go to school. Somehow, when they were encouraged to go to school under the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, they were physically and psychologically humiliated and tortured as we find in case of Baby Kamble pre-independent and Omprakash Valmiki post-independent India. Their main motive was to make them aware of their human rights. The poem reveals the anxiety and agony. The poetic persona is not without an interactive self. Under the influence of his ancestors, he speaks his traditional dialect whereas his Brahman school teacher forces him to use the so-called “pure” tongue of the upper castes. The Self that would have accepted his lot quietly a few decades

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earlier, questions the suggestion now. He asks which tongue he is supposed to speak in. In this way, the poetic persona gains the identity of a speaking Self.

Contradictory Living Styles of Castes

In the another poem, “The Life We Live,” Kamble explores the contradictory living style of dalits and *savarnas*. The speaking self that questioned the authorities in the previous poem appears here too. By the way of contrasting the life style of upper castes with that of his own, this speaking self makes his presence felt.

This self-created umbrella of Hindu philosophy is creating a huge gap in our society. There is a Dalit caste in our society which remained alive on the leftover of food and rotten animals. They (Brahamans) enjoyed delicious dishes in the name of Brahma. A Dalit’s dead body was “shoved under half-turned sand”; they were kicked, abused and spitted upon. Just opposite to it, there were *savarnas* who were considered as descendants of sages. They enjoyed the natural resources, golden cup and ultimately their dead bodies were burnt with sandalwood. Kamble exclaims whether this world would develop faster if *savarnas* were forced to live the life of dalits. The new speaking Self is bold to challenge the authority. This discrepancy on the basis of caste compels an intellectual to think and re-think. To quote Kamble’s own words:

If you were to live the life we live

Then out of you poems arise.

We: kicked and spat at our piece of bread.

We: down gutter degraders of our heritage.

You: its sole repository, descendant of sage

We: never have a paisa to scratch our arse

You: the golden cup of offering in your bank.

Your bodies burn with flames in sandalwood

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Ours are 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? (Anand 86)

J.V. Pawar's *Tide*

“I Have Become the Tide” by J.V. Pawar presents a powerful voice for liberation from the atrocities of ages. In this poem, the surging mental and physical agonies of unprivileged class assume a volcanic eruption. Metaphorically, the poet compares his great agonies with the sea and the sea shore. The sorrow of have-nots soaks all the harmony of their life as the sand soaks the water of the sea. Their agony is as vast as the sea, though the sea has its shore, but their sorrow doesn't have. He wants to find out the limitation of suffering. He relates with the proverb ‘oil from the sand’ and concludes that if sand is squeezed hard, oil can be received. It means, impossible can be possible but, the end of sorrow in the context of Dalits is impossible. He wants to be a powerful tide which can swipe away all the dust from the reality. Here the narrator identifies with tide and discovers a new Self which is more substantial!

As the sand soaks up the water of the shore,

So my great sorrow.

How long will it be like the sand?

How long will it cry out from its obstinate will to exist?

As a matter of fact, it should have been in tide like the sea out there.

Much would have been gained by rolling over the drawfs around here.

Even the sea has ashore; why doesn't my sorrow have limits? Why didn't those who squeezed oil from the sand have inkling the sorrow? (Anand 141)

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Manusmriti

Further, he goes back to the event of 1928 which was the first satyagrah of Ambedkar movement in Mahad in which people were to drink from public reservoir. It ended in violence and later a conference was called and the portion of Manusmriti which justified untouchability, was burned. That was the strong wave to get justice. The poet says:

The wind that blows everyday

that day yelled in my ear-

“ women stripped”

“ village boycott”

“men killed”

As it spoke, it gave me a mantra: “Make another Mahad!”

My hands now move toward the weapon on the wall. (Anand 141)

His voice becomes stronger in the last stanza of the poem when he compares himself to the sea and decides to build tombs from where he will command everything. It will be the limitation of the suffering of his community. In the words of the poet:

I am now the sea; I soar , I surge,

I move out build your tombs,

The wind, storms, sky, earth

Now are all mine.

In every inch of the rising struggle

I stand erect. (Anand 142)

The poet's identification with nature is complete. A new Self which is free and pure emerges out in the end. This new self is not only free from agonies but also has the capacity to liberate others. This poem highlights the determination of unprivileged class to wipe out the atrocities against them, and makes proper platform to stand up. Now, their buried self has been converted into strong tides via words and will give them new identity till eternity.

To sum up, it is argued that Dalit poetry is a serious attempt to salvage the dead self to a living one with the help of images and rhythm. Dalit poets have indeed succeeded in asserting their identity in various ways. That Namdeo Dhassal has his own way which is different from that of Arun Kamble and J.V. Pawar as is revealed in the above analysis. An attempt to achieve absolute liberty on political, social, economic, educational and literary levels brought Dalit intellectuals under the umbrella of Mahamanav Babasaheb Ambedkar and its result is fruitful. Their emotions enshrined in the poems have acquired a remarkable place in the main stream of Indian literature.

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