

## Urban Spaces and the Others: Representation of 'Dalits' in Namdev Dhasal's Poetry

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Article Received: 15/08/2023

Article Accepted: 29/09/2023

Published Online: 30/09/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.09.168

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### Abstract

The city has always been a contested place where space management is hierarchical. It plays a crucial role in social subjugation and category creation. It maintains class and binaries. If we examine a city and its narrative, we find that the notion of the lower-class body has been imagined and created. It is significant to study the idea of body as the notion has changed from a dualistic approach to the discussion of body through an ontological approach in the twentieth century (Larsson 2-3). Similarly, rejecting the binary between biology and culture, Grosz in her essay "Bodies Cities" argues how "the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality (242).

The poems of Namdev Dhasal talk from the scam of Earth and regarding the real untouchables, the voice of the suppressed and oppressed. In *Golpitha* (1972), he writes about the red-light area of Mumbai and speaks about the Low-Class working people, pimps, prostitutes, and various other types of people. The paper will try to investigate and support all these points. The paper looks at the writings of Namdeo Dhasal and tries to find out how he has represented Dalits and other socially and economically oppressed people in his writings. On a similar line, the paper explores the literary representations of the margins of Mumbai through some selected poems of Dhasal, translated from Marathi into English by various translators. The paper argues that Dhasal consciously refers to the past and emphasizes present lived realities to portray Dalit lives and problems boldly.

Furthermore, both these notions are very much part of modernism in the context of India, as Supriya Chaudhri argues that the period from 1955 to 1975 is significant as the literature shifts from modernity to modernism, marked by "new modernist oeuvre, densely allusive, rooted in the experiences of urban loneliness, the body, and sexuality" (Chaudhri 957). City emerges as an important phenomenon in the study of modernism, as Gyan Prakash argues, "Modernism was a uniquely metropolitan phenomenon" (Gyan Prakash 3).

The paper attempts to study selected poetry of Namdeo Dhasal in English translation. In the larger context, it attempts to study how the body gets constructed in the poetry of Dhasal. The present paper studies Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* in the above-mentioned context and tries to see how the 'dalit' body and self, have been projected in an urban setup of an Indian city. It also examines how the poet reacts to the issues of 'Dalits'. The present paper attempts to study the notion of body in the context of the city, present-day Mumbai. In the larger context, it attempts to study how the body gets constructed in the context of Mumbai city in the poetry of Dhasal. Furthermore, it also attempts to study how this body is affected by social and caste markers.

**Keywords:** Dalit, city, body, Dhasal, untouchable, caste

### **Introduction:**

Namdeo Dhasal is a well-known Marathi poet and writer. Born in 1949, he hardly had any formal education. Like the great leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dhasal was also born into the Mahar Community, which is considered to be an 'untouchable' community. He worked as a taxi driver in Mumbai in his early life and lived with the people of the 'underworld' like pimps, prostitutes, criminals, gangsters, traders, and peddlers. He, along with many other Dalit literary luminaries, founded the Dalit Panther's Movement in the year 1972. The militant organization was founded to bring young Dalit people together to fight against Dalit oppression in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India. Dhasal was a literary luminary in Maharashtra. He has published nearly eight volumes of poetry. In 1999, he was honored with the Padmashree Award for his contribution to literature, and later in 2004, the Sahitya Akademi, during its golden jubilee celebrations, honored Dhasal with a lifetime achievement award.

Namdeo Dhasal's migration from his hometown to the place where he lived as a grown-up, or the life he has seen, has a great impact on him. He has internalized the problems and anger of all those people who surrounded him. He has not restricted himself only as the poet of religion-based Dalit. This is what reflects and one finds in his poetry. Further, I would certainly like to say that he cannot be regarded as an illiterate or a poet who did not have his formal education, as far as his poetry is concerned. He wrote *Priya Darshini*, which is about the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He wrote one poem every year dedicated to Ambedkar. He also wrote a few essays and two novels.

Dhasal's poetry explicitly shows the influence, as he himself says, "The biggest influence on me has been that of major European poets. It was the Marathi little magazines that awakened me and made me aware (Chitre, 167). Dilip Chitre says Namdeo is a self-taught person with an astonishingly wide range of reading and amazing acumen (Chitre, 25). The poet developed an interest in poetry at an early age and nurtured it when he was in his teenage years (Chitre, 166). His poetry is surrealistic, which does not have any continuous process or limit itself to one context. It is obscure and demands a reader to do homework, or it needs a reader who has a vast knowledge of various subjects, as they alone can appreciate it in a better manner. This shows the poet's knowledge and understanding, and command over various subjects.

### **Caste and Dalit Issues:**

#### **Origin and History of the term Dalit:**

India has accepted the principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice to form a democratic country. In the eyes of the Dalits, these very principles are merely boasted by the ruler or master classes of this country. This is so because a larger section of the community, Dalits, did not feel the presence of these principles in execution. In addition to this, Dalits are deprived of education, power, wealth. More importantly, they were denied dignity in everyday life. They were shamed and reminded about their low birth. Birth of a human in a specific religion or caste is beyond human control. Here, I would like to narrate one of those instances that showcases torment on them during eighteenth century India, in Vinay Dharwadker's words,

In eighteenth century, Pune, the center of an imperialistic Brahman culture in Maharashtra, an untouchable had to wear a bell to let members of the higher castes know that he was in vicinity, had to use a sheaf of leaves to erase his footprints as he walked through the upper-caste quarters of the town, and could not even let his shadow fall on a Brahman (322).

It means they never had respite and were forced to curse their birth. However, these Dalits also have caste categories within their community, and *Mahar* are considered the elite among the Dalit

(Chitre, 23). The reason behind considering them elite in the community, according to Eleanor Zelliot, is,

It makes the claim that the untouchables were former Kshatriyas, demoted by the Peshwa at the time of the Mahadurgadevi famine in 1676 for eating whatever they could find to save their lives (32).

This makes one understand that the Hindu community follows stringent purity and pollution rules and regulations. It has never taken into account any situation or circumstances. Thus, the huge amount of dejection and disrespect the Dalit community has been facing regularly every single day is unimaginable. Perhaps the old methods of exclusion and employment do not exist anymore due to various reasons. However, the trauma and treatment did not cease with any generation or time. The community has been called untouchable (*Achuth*). However, on different occasions different terms were coined or used in different time periods to identify the community for various reasons.

The term 'Dalit' was initially coined by the social reformer, Jyotiba Phule, the founder of the Satya Shodak Samaj, a movement for the oppressed of society. During the colonial times, the British Administration used the term 'Depressed Classes' from 1919 onwards, and before this, 'Dalits' were known as 'untouchables' and 'outcastes.' Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, used the term 'Harijan' for the oppressed classes. However, Dr. B.R Ambedkar was not happy with it.

The term 'Dalit' can be interpreted in multiple ways and contexts. However, in general, the term connotes the people who are suppressed and oppressed in the name of religion and caste. In other words, the existing social categories, dominance of power, hierarchical system, discrimination, and some other cultural and political factors are the causes of Dalits' sufferings. Many people in India have always been affected by these matters, irrespective of their religion. Nevertheless, Dalit and subaltern consciousness, discourses, and literature have started their new flight in India and the world as well. The southern part of India, and especially Maharashtra, has always been the main hub of Dalit movements and Dalit writings. From Jyotibha Phule, Dr. Babashaheb Ambedkar, to till date, many writers have nurtured and shaped Dalit writings. They have contributed to the making and establishment of a new genre of writing altogether. There are a whole lot of writings on these issues, but very few of them are available in English translations. There are conflicts of opinion regarding some available translations, too.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar was a visionary. He was aware of the significance of writing, and any Movement or protest is incomplete without writing. He, along with some handpicked academicians, began to express the conditions and atrocities carried out on Dalits in their writings. The literature was in the regional language. With this began the journey of Dalit literature. However, it was only in 1958, in its first conference of 'Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh' the term 'Dalit Literature' was coined. Though Dalit literature is comparatively a contemporary phenomenon inspired by Buddhist ideology, Marxism, and the Mahar movement, the epoch-making Bhakti movement in Maharashtra protested against the exploitation of the oppressed (Manoja, 476-482)

#### **Dhasal's Idea and Presentation of Dalit:**

Namdeo Dhasal's idea of Dalit is very broad; it is not just religion-based Dalit but a person living a Dalit kind of life, including workers, minorities, Adivasis, and women, irrespective of religion and gender. His Dalits are those who form the lowest strata of society. They are suffering and struggling because they want to survive in this world. The reasons behind the creation of the Dalit are the caste system, social categories, power discrimination, Brahminical dominance, and some other cultural and political factors that cause the sufferings of Dalits. Modernity and India have always been affected by

these things. Hierarchy is another aspect of creating Dalit. If we go further, we can see Globalization as one more type of oppression or imperialism because it is market and money that oppress some portion of the people for the benefit of some other portion of society. In his own words, he describes it as follows,

I have a mission, and that is to oppose all forms of exploitation-economic, social, and cultural. My poetry is a product of my spontaneous commitment to my mission (Chitre, 171).

By this, Dhasal has problematised the idea of Dalit or given a broader definition to the term by including all the economic, social, and cultural exploitation. Here Dhasal, instead as a leader or representative of a community in his literary work, represents all those people who, some or the other way is being suppressed. This is how his poetry is for all, or in fact has universal appeal that touches the hearts of all the people who are living or lived the life of the Dalit. He has not confined himself to the religious barrier. It is here he makes it explicit how he is different from his other contemporary Dalit writers and shows that he is, in fact, talking and fighting against these evils. He talks on behalf of all these oppressed and suppressed people, leaving aside the religious barriers.

His idea of Dalit itself shows that he is not fighting against the caste system alone and trying to reject the past, but in fact, he is the voice of all those poor, restrained people who work in the dirt for those clean high high-standard people. These people, in the act of killing their hunger, eat whatever is edible available to them. In this whole discourse, the high-class people, whether they are Brahmins or economically strong people, emerged in the guise of a colonizer who wants to colonise these people by showing them limitations and by assigning them tasks. This is what we find in his first collection of poems called *Golpitha*.

Further, if we notice carefully, the idea of Dalit is slightly different in the writings of Dhasal. It indicates that to him, a Dalit is not just a caste category; rather, he emphasizes a person living a 'Dalit kind of life', including workers, minorities, adivasis, and women, irrespective of religion and class. For him, Dalits are being oppressed, and his poetry depicts the sufferings of those sections. His Dalits are those who form the lowest strata of society. They are suffering and struggling because they want to survive in this world. Dhasal has problematised the idea of Dalit or given a broader definition to the term by including economic, social, and cultural exploitations. Here, Dhasal represents all those people, leaving aside the religious barriers. Dhasal makes it explicit how he is different from all his other contemporary writers and shows that he is, in fact, fighting against larger evils. So, his idea of Dalit itself shows that he is the voice of all those poor, restrained people who work in the dirt for the 'clean high standard' people.

#### **Dalit Poetry and Translations:**

A lot of Dalit poetry written in the regional dialects has been translated into English. It is through translation that the world of Marathi Dalit writing opened up reading possibilities to many non-Marathi readers. An acclaimed new generation Marathi literary figure, Dilip Chitre has written short stories, criticism, and travelogues besides poetry, both in Marathi and English. Apart from all these, he is a translator of merit and has translated poetry from Marathi to English throughout his life. He won both the Sahitya Akademi Award and Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize. He has translated many works of Dhasal into English. In those translated works, he has reproduced the images and metaphors and hard-hitting voice of Namdeo to the English-speaking world. Even in translation, poems like *Man, You Should Explode, Hunger, Kamatipura, Cruelty, Punishment*, etc., have retained their quality and created an audience of their own. Chitre says,

I seemed to grasp his poem as a whole, yet many years of its seemingly vital details would slip out of my fingers when my translator's hand tried to render them in English. However, despite its inadequacy in facing the source text, a target text creates a stylistic analog that has to stand or fall on its own, and this is my stance as a translator (Chitre, 2007).

Vinay Dharwadker, in his article, "Dalit Poetry in Marathi," argues that the rejection of the past on ideological grounds appears in a particularly strong form in modern Marathi Poetry with the Dalit poets of the 1960s and 1970s (319). But in the poetry of Dhasal, one finds how he concentrates on the present and focuses on Dalit life and their problems by presenting issues in an aggressive manner with a conscious reference to the past. It is not the rejection of the past but a step towards a better, humane society and dignified life. Namdeo portrays the lives of Dalits who are forced to live and lead a degraded life. He says this is the 'underworld' or the 'number two world', not only the illegitimate world but the world of second-class human beings, a second-hand world and subordinate society, an inferior zone, the bottom of the world. Namdeo has broadened the thematic base of his poetry and written about the slavish conditions of the margins. He views that they are not part of mainstream society. They are considered the beasts of burden, seen as objects of contempt or pity. They are never treated as fellow human beings and are treated with genuine compassion.

#### **Golpitha:**

Namdeo Dhasal, a Dalit poet and Dalit Panther activist from Maharashtra, published an anthology of poems, 'Golpitha' in 1971. The poems in 'Golpitha' stand against caste discrimination, caste prejudices, socio-economic, political, and cultural inequality, and gender exploitation. Namdeo Dhasal has projected the predicament of Dalits and the have-nots, and the prostitutes. The people who are depressed due to their lower caste-class become the protagonists of his poems. 'Golpitha' is a revolt against casteism, untouchability, classism, and gender exploitation. Namdeo is a poetic genius, and works like *Golpitha* is his powerful masterpiece. He expressed his anger in explosive language against the system that made him and his people untouchable. *Golpitha* (1972) was the first collection of poems of Dhasal that speaks about the red light area of Mumbai and speaks about the low-class working people, small-time smugglers, drug traffickers, superi killers, prostitutes, pimps, brothels, loan sharks, henchmen, crooks, petty politicians, goons, and thieves, and so on. Through his writings, many a time Dhasal expressed his anger in explosive language against the system that made him and people untouchable. In the poem Man, You Should Explode, he says,

*This splendorous city for which we gave blood.*

*And won in return the prerogative to eat stones.*

*We must, this very moment, put dynamite under its sky-kissing buildings.*

The above lines convey the anguished emotions of Dhasal against the hegemonic society, which keeps on oppressing the weaker sections of society based on caste, gender, and occupation. In Dhasal's poetry, the idea of Dalit appears different. It indicates that Dalit is not just a caste category rather he emphasizes the living conditions of the exploited people like workers, minorities, adivasis, and women, irrespective of religion and class. For him, Dalits are being oppressed, and his poetry is a depiction of the life of the oppressed. His Dalits, people from the lowest strata of society, suffer and struggle because they want to survive in this world. Dhasal has problematised the idea of Dalit and has given a broader definition to the term, which includes economic, social, and cultural exploitations. Here, Dhasal represents people keeping aside the barriers of religion. Dhasal is different from his contemporary writers and proves that he waged a relentless battle against all sorts of exploitations. His idea of Dalit



shows that he is the voice of the voiceless, lingering in filthy environs in the service of the so-called upper-class people.

Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), his first collection of poetry, portrays the plight of the 'red light areas' of Mumbai and speaks about the low-class working people, pimps, prostitutes, and other downtrodden people. Dhasal is a poetic genius to represent the lower strata of society. The work is a powerful masterpiece on the 'literature from and of the low'. The acclaimed collection includes noted poems like *Man You Should Explode*, *Their Orthodox Pity*, *Allahu Akbar*, *Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute*, and *My Intended Collage*. It has been written in the Mahar dialect, the native tongue of Dhasal. It has the flavors of Bumbaiya Hindi, the city's lingua franca, mixed with Muslim speaking Urdu. Apart from these linguistic factors, it features the voices of laborers from Andhra Pradesh; prostitutes brought from Karnataka and Nepal. Everything together makes a unique cocktail. *Golpitha* is a multi-dimensional poem, a sequel to interrelated poems, or a poem of a journey through a location. It belongs to the long intentional tradition in modern poetry. But the boundary is not just verbal. It deals with the other world of one of the megacities of today. Much later, we saw it when Mira Nair found a vivid cinematic location for her famous *Salaam Bombay*, or Danny Boyle in his well-acclaimed *Slumdog Millionaire*. Dhasal's world of Mumbai consists of what Vijay Tendulkar describes in the introduction of *Golpitha*'s first publication:

This is a world where stomachs are empty or half empty,... bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility,... diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies,... of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighborhood tough guys and pimps (2007, 10).

### Features of Dhasal's Poems:

Dhasal's poetry breaks the stylistic conventions. He includes in his poetry many words and expressions that only the Dalits normally use. Thus, in *Golpitha*, he adapted the language that was of the red-light milieu, which shocked the middle-class readers. Dhasal sympathizes with prostitutes and has represented them in *Golpitha* as

An object of carnal love, but still loathed. Unlike a wife, the prostitute has no institutionalized sanctity. She is therefore denied dignity as a human being and her status of ultimate untouchable – serving other human beings by allowing them to degrade one (Chitre, 11).

The other volume, titled *Moorkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavile* (1975), was translated as *The Stupid Old Man Moved Mountains*. It has some important poems like *A Seasonal Poem from the Police Custody* and *Song of the Dog and the Republic*. This collection focuses on daily characters like one's beloved, one's wife, one's aunt, and one's mother. This is somewhat different from his political poetry. The poems like *Tuhi Yatta Kanchi (What Grade Are You In)* are a tirade against the upper castes and the limitations imposed on the life of the lowly. Dhasal shocks his readers with his militant expressions. Laurie Hovell says that "Dhasal's explicit sexual references are shocking in a society in which, up until a few years ago, cinema couples were not even allowed to kiss on screen" (77).

The collection also contains noted poems like *Kamatipura*, *Hunger*, and *Sweet Baby Poverty*. *Kamatipura* represents the fusion of many languages like Marathi, Urdu, Telugu, and Kannada. *Kamatipura* is the place where the sex workers live in the streets lined with 'cages,' and that is their home. It seems like the poor people's a community hospital, ward afterward, and being aware of life as it is lived in a terminal ward (Chitre 161). His next work, *Khel* or *Play*, came in 1983, which contains

mostly untitled poems. In 1986, another volume titled *Gandu Bagicha (Arsefuckers Park)* was brought out. It includes poems like *New Delhi 1985*, *Cruelty*, and *A Long Wait*.

In 1995, a volume titled *Ya Sattet Jeev Rahmat Nahi (The Soul Doesn't Find Peace in this Regime)* was written. It includes poems such as *Punishment*, *Worry*, *People*, and *Comes the Day, Passes the Day*. In 2005, he penned *Me Marale Sooryacharya Rathache Ghode Saat (I Slew the Seven Horses of the Chariot of the Sun)* and in 2006, *Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee (Holding Your Finger, I Walk On)*. He also wrote *Priya Darshini*, which is about the former Prime Minister of India, Ms. Indira Gandhi. He also continued writing one poem every year in honour of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He wrote two novels and a few prose works, too.

#### **City space and the others:**

Mumbai is a city of many odors and noises. Stench of leaky drainage with a blend of human urine and feces, stale food and garbage, which is commonly noticed in places like Central Mumbai, Kamathipura, Dhor Chwal, Arab Galli, and so on, are the neglected places of the city where the immigrants take shelter. These are the 'other spaces' of the city, and Dalits and other lumpen proletariat of Mumbai reside in these places. In Mumbai, a large section of people are immigrants aiming for the prospect of a better life than in rural India. But uprooted from the countryside, these people get nothing but exploited in the rotten core of Mumbai. The upper classes and the privileged castes of the city lived class and status-wise, and distributed the places according to the status of human beings.

Namdeo said this is the 'underworld' or the 'number two world', not only the illegitimate world but the world of second-class human beings, a second-hand world and subordinate society, an inferior zone, the bottom of the world. Namdeo has widened the things and writes about the slavery of these people and their condition. He saw that they were not part of the human society. They are the beasts of burden, seen as objects of contempt or pity but never empathized with as a fellow human, never treated with genuine compassion.

#### **Picturesque Presentation:**

Photographic realism is one of the prominent qualities of Namdeo's Poems. Imagery and metaphor are the crucial components in Dhasal's poetry. He has created the Dalit identity and self. There is a picturesque reality in his writings. From his poem, one can visualize the prostitutes of Kamatipura waiting for customers in the streets of Mumbai. Other visuals, like the street and both sides, these people of the working class had made their huts; a beggar who doesn't have a leg sleeps in a chilly winter night in Haji Ali beside the sea shore with a rotten rag are powerful enough. The skull caps sported by Muslim kebab shop owners keep preparing or selling kebab, or the Burkha-clad Muslim women in the narrow streets of Mumbai are seen doing their household things or managing children, are very much common. In the evening, beside the pan shop, the workers are seen playing cards, while smoking or drinking is part of their lives. In the morning, the workers line up to go to work, and a small kid is seen selling stuff in an open marketplace; these powerful images consist of his writings.

Dalits' land and home, and slums have been occupied by the businessmen, the Government, or the real estate people. His language is of high voltage, which crackles with rage and compassion. Dhasal employs an aesthetic of fracture towards writing into existence the continuing alienation of Dalits seduced by the shiny assurance of a still new nation. An uncompromising spirit informs his poetry, which constantly echoes the agony of the dispossessed, homeless people. According to him, the stigma of untouchability originates in the loathing of the lowliest of human beings and from downgrading the people, and has become a tradition and will continue like it.

There is a tough and unsentimental quality in Dhasal's vision. Through his powerful voice and writings, Dhasal strives for a change. He portrays Dalits in a really vulnerable way. His use of specific

words and expressions creates a reality of Dalit life through aggressive expressions. His poetry talks of the people who are considered the 'scum of the earth' and deals with the untouchables, the real oppressed. With his raw and colloquial use of language, of the oppressed, he has raised his voice against the hegemonic forces. His characters live in *chalas* (huts), not in 'houses'. Dhasal's language is of high voltage, brushing poetry on the festering innards of Mumbai. This crackles with both rage and compassion. Thus, Dhasal employs an aesthetic of fracture in his writing about the continuing alienation of Dalits seduced by the shiny assurance of a 'still new' nation.

With his raw and undistilled vulgar language, he has raised his voice against the hegemonic forces that have appropriated all resources, be it social, cultural, economic, religious, or philosophical, of the country for a long time to their advantage. His Dalit lives in Chala, not in a house. It is a journey through the bowels of these quarters over which we have constructed robust mental flyovers. Dalit's land and home, and the slum, have been occupied by the businessmen, the Government, or the real estate people. His language is of high voltage, brushing poetry on the festering innards of Mumbai. There is a tough and unsentimental quality in Dhasal's vision. This crackles with both rage and compassion.

Thus, Dhasal employs an aesthetic of fracture towards writing into existence the continuing alienation of Dalits seduced by the shiny assurance of a 'still new' nation. (*A Current of Blood*, 2007, Cover Page) An uncompromising spirit informs his poetry, which constantly echoes the agony of the dispossessed, homeless people. Dhasal attacks the inequalities of the present social order in a forthright manner. In his utterance, one finds the stigma of untouchability originating in the loathing of the lowliest of human beings and from downgrading the people and becoming traditions. Through his powerful poetry, he had launched a single-handed war against the middle class and sanitized the world of literary readers. Thus, Dhasal is a perfect example of counter writing who questioned and represented the 'other side' which we generally don't like to talk about.

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