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Literary Representation of Rage in Dalit Panther Poetry

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Abstract

This paper samples a few poems by Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar to establish the politics of Dalit Panther Movement (1972-77). One's grief and anger about discrimination and stereotyping, unlike hatred, is loaded with information and energy. If used in creative ways, anger can become an important tool to empower the oppressed and bring in positive changes. I argue, as generational trauma and public shame inhabit Dalit narratives of self-assertion, rage becomes an essential ingredient of Dalit art and aesthetics. However, it requires empathetic reading to understand nuances of lived Dalit experiences.

Keywords:
Dalit Panther Poetry; Social Othering; Rage; Namdeo Dhasal; J. V. Pawar

Introduction

Probably the only Indian literary movement to turn into spontaneous resistant political activism, Dalit Panther Movement (DPM), certainly calls for attention in a study of 1970s as a decade in India. This paper[1] studies poetry and revolutionary political activism of a marginal community that acts on its rage against humiliation and social Othering. A close reading of Dalit literary representations indicates generations of trauma and systematic violence. I argue, shame and public humiliation transformed into rage become essential content of Dalit art and aesthetics. There can be no co-existence until there is acknowledgement of past wrong-doings

[1] This paper is extracted from my PhD thesis on social Othering of 1970s India.

or systematic oppression and upgradation of Dalit living conditions. Dalit writings offer progression towards a secured future and equality.

Dalit Panther Movement was established on 29 May 1972 and disbanded in Mumbai on 7 March 1977. The period between May 1972 and June 1975 (before Indian Emergency was declared) is considered crucial for the movement. Its founding fathers, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale and J. V. Pawar, were writers involved with the little magazine movement in Maharashtra. On 5 January 1975, riots at Worli and Naigaon killed many Panthers and weakened the organization. Panthers mobilized Dalit youth, recruited and trained cadres. The organization opened as a space to express one's discontentment with social failures. Dalit Panthers implemented terror tactics, but unlike Naxal extremists, did not resort to annihilation of their enemies.[2] Their revolt was against existing practices of caste discrimination, untouchability, and feudalistic or capitalist social structures that aided segregation of local populace. They compelled administrative authorities to act against caste-based atrocities.

To understand history and politics of the period, I refer to Lata Murugkar's *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal*, J. V. Pawar's *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*, news reports, and interviews with Dalit Panther leaders like Raja Dhale and J. V. Pawar. This paper samples a few translated works of Dalit Panther poets, Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar. Poems are testimonies of personal loss and human subjugation, and interviews and autobiographies provide first-hand critical insight to the movement. Gopal Guru's thoughts on humiliation and discrimination, Sara Ahmed's reflections on human shame and vulnerability, and Audre Lorde's views on rage and political resistance mould the fundamental arguments of this paper.

Literary Representations of Dalit Humiliation and Rage

Both Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, founders of Dalit Panther movement, were associated with Maharashtra's Little Magazine movement which occurred alongside a wave of literary awakening in the country, such as, Bengal's Hungryalist movement, Naxalite poetry from Bengal and UP, and 'nagna kavita' or naked poetry of Digambar Kavalu of Andhra Pradesh. 1960s Maharashtra saw an emergence of counter-culture among the youth, whose defiance and anti-establishment attitude found voice in contemporary writings. There was a gap between the number of educated young minds and available job opportunities, which gave rise to a

[2] Detailed in J. V. Pawar's interview with *The Wire*, 5 June 2022.

class of young and agitated authors who condemned middle-class morality as sham, and termed responsibility as an absence of spontaneity or creative joy. This was the essence of Little Magazines too. Though short-lived, it was a powerful literary drive. However, it appalled middle-class genteel society by its preoccupation with human sexual desire and defiance of social conventions (Murugkar 51). Most Dalit youths, now enrolled in colleges, were exposed to this culture, and were inspired by the writings' public disavowal of traditional upper-caste Hindu way of life. They also began reading reformist, revolutionary writings of Phule and Ambedkar to gain awareness on Dalit plight. Journals like *Muknayak*, *Yeru*, *Atta*, *Vidroha*, *Janata* and *Prabuddha Bharat* offered tools for literary reimagination and Dalit emancipation (Murugkar 52). New Dalit literature that became more popular due to the little magazines did away with bourgeois romanticism and adhered to social realism using crude language that lacked euphemism. Authors used it to expose everyday casteism and offer honest portrayals of poverty or slum-life amidst dearth and hazardous living conditions.

Dalit atrocities enumerated in 1965 Elayaperumal report were perhaps the immediate cause of the formation and rise of Dalit Panthers. So, it will do good to visit a poem by J. V. Pawar that describes one such event. Though Pawar is better known as a Marathi historian, his poetry is marked with a distinctive characteristic – it reflects on incidents of caste violence that have been eliminated from mainstream history or contemporary politics. In his collection, *Blockade*, a poem refers to the ruthless blinding of Gavai brothers on 26 September 1974. Sixteen-year-old Ginyanabai of Dhakli village, Akola district, was promised marriage and then impregnated by Uddhavrao Shinde, son of a Maratha farm owner, Shaligram Shinde, while she was working on their farm. As her father and uncle – the Gavai brothers – went to seek justice and offer the child for marriage, the upper caste farm owners did not only turn down their request but also filed a case against them. But when the court acquitted the rape survivor and her kin, it further enraged the farm owners. Men sent to attack the Gavai brothers overpowered them and gorged their eyes out (Pawar, *Dalit Panthers…* 187). Inhuman torture and denial of justice prove that systematic violence was regularly unleashed on the poor and resourceless. This case, like all other cases of injustice on Dalits, draws links between the executive and upper-class landowners who work together to maintain power in rural India. The Panthers followed this case closely, and in 1975, the Gavai brothers were able to share their story in a Mumbai press conference. This case also influenced the removal of the then Maharashtra chief minister, Vasantrao Naik.[3]

[3] From the introduction of "Excerpt: Chapter on the blinding of the Gavai brothers from *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*," Hindustan Times, 20 Jan, 2018.

In his poem that refers to the case of Gavai brothers, Pawar is sarcastic about Indian pride, and about what authors do to Dalit characters in literary works. He writes, 'The ashes of hundreds in Sherpur / is our culture's greater achievement / and the Gavai brothers' case / at Dhakli is the greatest felicitation.' Distraught by the revelation and commonplace violence, he reminds us, 'the eyes of Gawai brothers' are now added to the long list of Dalit sacrifices, both real and fictional, such as 'Shambuka's head, / Eklavya's thumb, Ramdasa's hammered penis / and Gopi's chopped...hands and feet'[4] This is also to say, if one spots Dalit sacrifices and caste violence in puranas and epics, it directs us towards the nation that is to emerge out of reading these supposed religious documents. In other words, a nation that revers such violence as essential to classical texts or use that classical text for religious grooming certainly do not see state sponsored violence or atrocities on disempowered Dalits as aberration to State's normal course of political affairs.

The 1971 census presented a grim picture of Scheduled Caste daily existence and pauperization. They were landless labourers in rural India. In cities, they were scavengers or sweepers, and most families lived in unventilated huts with improper sanitization, thus suffering from diseases like typhoid and malaria.[5] Dalit Panthers' poetry and poetic images refer to slum life and comment extensively on such poor living conditions. Despite their conversion to Buddhism, atrocities continued in rural India, as political and economic power was monopolized by upper-caste Hindus. This made it difficult for administrators or police personnels to offer protection to neo-Buddhists. Moreover, the Elayaperumal committee established that police in rural India were not aware of Prohibition of Untouchability Act.[6] This aided upper caste Hindus, mostly Congressmen, to perpetuate violence on Dalit citizens. Around 11,000 cases of nationwide atrocities on Dalits were reported, which included 1,177 murders in a year out (Pawar, *Dalit Panthers*... 13). Astonishing cases of caste violence that year included Dalit women being raped and paraded naked, Dalit men being beaten up for wearing good clothes and slippers, and human excreta was dumped in community wells. Dalit leaders and activists realised, such instances were similar to atrocities on the Black populace in US. The promise of equal citizenship for the educated, employed Dalit youth constructed hopes of

[4] From *Blockade*. Published and referred to by Yogesh Maitreya in "Dalit writing, global contexts: JV Pawar's poetry collection *Blockade* embodies the spirit of the Dalit Panthers," *Firstpost*, 30 June, 2019.

[5] Gare and Limaye studied cases from 206 Maharashtrian villages to understand the plight and poverty of Scheduled Caste families. This study was published in their book, *Maharashtratil Dalit Shodh Ani Bodh*, Sahadhyayan Prakashan, 1973.

[6] From Perumal Committee Report, 1971.

better treatment from genteel society. But contrary to the community's expectations, practices of untouchability continued. Seething rage of Dalit youths, specifically neo-Buddhists, found inspiration in 1968 armed resistance of American Black Panthers that struck hard on racial discrimination in US. Time Magazine widely covered the movement, arrests, and trials of Black Panthers, which in turn, framed or structured the Dalit Panther movement in India.[7]

It is necessary to understand Panther poetry through the emotions they represent. Transformation of public shame and humiliation into art, rage or resistant politics is essential to Dalit aesthetics. Description of Dalit lives, shamed for their existence in upper-caste, upper-class public spaces, lived long in hiding with limited resources and amidst unhygienic conditions, found expression in literature. Upper-caste genteel society's shame in acknowledging Dalit plight made it difficult for upper-caste readers to gaze at the truth depicted in Panther literature. Disgust felt by such readers, then, is not for Dalit authors' use of language, or the rage emoted, but for the content and depiction of images inspired by Dalit authors' lived experiences.

Public shaming and humiliation regularly faced by marginal communities cause an inward movement, a shrinking from external sources of shame. This desire for cover is a residual emotion of pain from perceiving oneself as a symbol of shame that can evoke disgust in others or realizing that one has qualities that others term as shameful or dehumanizing. This can soon transform into self-blame or self-harm (Ahmed 104). Rage and spontaneous revolution are other ways to deal with long term humiliation. But transforming one's humiliation and silence into language or action is fraught with danger, as survivors have more to lose than perpetrators. Giving words to one's silent suffering is not only a self-revelation, but also brings one's inconsolable, suffering self to light. For the powerless, public visibility or acknowledgement of collective pain, sorrow and suffering expose their vulnerability; but again, silence and inaction do not guarantee strength, nor does it protect one from fear (Lorde 40-44). Wording one's fear, rage, and pain entails responsibility towards oneself. In owning one's narrative, they decide to speak for themselves by choosing a comfortable time to share their story rather than being spoken for hurriedly or by others. Moreover, sharing one's life experiences poses as a caution and ensures progression towards securing safety for future generations.

[7] From "'We stood up against the establishment': An interview with Raja Dhale." Dhale's interview with Manohar Jadhav and Mangesh Narayanrao Kale, first published in Marathi journal *Khel*, then abridged and translated by Anagha Bhat-Behere for *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

As established, anger is of no use in silence. Anger is residual of grief, but unlike hatred, is not directed towards death or destruction. Anger about exclusion, discrimination, and stereotyping, is loaded with information and energy, and aims towards progression and positive change. If used in creative ways, anger can become an important tool to empower the oppressed (Lorde 127-130). Dalit community has for long depended on kindness and wilfulness of other dominant social groups. They have been taught to fear others' anger, because others' anger do them no good, and instead only brings punishment, death, or pain. Dalit Panthers knew that the promised equality was already a failed dream, so the community needed to feel angry, and channelize that anger or hurt into positive directions. One way of doing it was to enlighten and aware the community through words – both in speech and writing. Dalit youths were to realize that to accept others' anger in silence, without retaliation, is to accept their own powerlessness and defeat in a democracy that allows no social hierarchy. Thus, concerns shared in Dalit Panther poetry emanate out of compassion for the community and realization that anger necessitates speaking.

Nameo Dhasal's "Man, You Should Explode"[8] begins with a kind of seething rage that Dalit youths are assumed to nurture, but the poem soon presents a desire to carve out a community borne by fraternity, solidarity and communal harmony. Dhasal portrays a drunk man's fury – 'Man,... / Jive to a savage drum beat / Smoke hash, smoke ganja / Chew opium... / Guzzle country booze... / Stay tipsy day and night, stay tight round the clock,' and calls for violence – the exact kind that Dalit men and women have suffered for generations – 'Man, you should keep handy a Rampuri knife / a dagger, an axe, a sword, an iron rod, a hockey stick, a bamboo / You should be ready to carve out anybody's innards without batting an eyelid / Commit murders and kill the sleeping ones / Turn humans into slaves; whip their arses with a lash / Cook your beans on their bleeding backsides...' The call for intimate violence transforms into call for revolution and anarchy – 'One should topple down streetlights / Smash up police stations and railway stations / One should hurl grenades; one should drop hydrogen bombs to raze / Literary societies, schools, colleges, hospitals, airports...' In his call to ditch names of scientists, historians, philosophers, and authors is a need to erase supremist, Eurocentric perspective to knowledge, scientific beliefs or religious dogmas. A new community is built after class and caste wars have been waged, after revolutions topple old structures. He writes, 'After this all those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others their slaves / ... should

[8] Trans., Dilip Chitre. Namdeo Dhasal, *A Current of Blood*, 9-11. First appeared, *Golpitha*, 1972.

stop calling one another names white or black, brahmin, kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra… / One should regard the sky as one's grandpa, the earth as one's grandma / and coddled by them everybody should bask in mutual love…' Dhasal desires to unite all into a community but also knows that community building is possible only after collective trauma and pain have been dealt with. Stickiness is the essence of building a close-knit community. And in his call to erase class and caste distinctions, the poet is willing to open territories of his community to the country's entire populace. This welcoming is, however, not possible without forgiving past misgivings and crimes on marginal communities. Dhasal writes as an insider, an inhabitant of Dalit grief and rage, of poverty-stricken underworld of dirt and untouchability. His depiction of human bodies or references to violent sexual activities instigate disgust in readers. Perhaps his motive is to make one conscious of the innate horridness of human flesh, biological waste, and mortality itself.[9] Once conscious, untouchability loses its social purpose of being ascribed to a particular race or caste. This perspective of studying disgust and shame makes readers aware of their mortal, corporeal self, and in a way directs us towards erasing generational shame ascribed only to the Dalit body. Though Dhasal comes with a lot of negative feelings, he lays grounds for positive futuristic visions.

J. V. Pawar's "Birds in Prison"[10] rings hopeful as Panthers march on, brightening street corners without fear of imprisonment. Pawar's description of jail break can be read as a commentary on the impossibility to encage life – 'Birds have drunk deep / of winds of equality / Oh, do not enslave them! / They'll soar aloft / bearing your prison along.' The poem indicates Dalit activists' intrinsic relationship with suffering whether inside or outside of prison. He writes, 'What fear does imprisonment pose? / Life itself was suffering / conceived as a prison.' Dalit life amidst economic, social, and religious constraints is synonymous to imprisonment. Though hopeful, the poem is a commentary on police manhandling of Dalit prisoners who rot as undertrial even now for petty crimes or are framed for other's crimes.

It is pertinent we mention the Worli riots in this context. Between January 5 and 10, 1974, Dalit Panthers faced violent police attacks. Police not only manhandled Dalit youths, but also acted in a partisan way by arresting them and not the real culprits or stone pelters in the meetings and chawls in Worli. Riots were triggered due to lack of just police action. It is important to note the timing of this crackdown. Meetings at Worli and Naigaon were to publicise Dalit Panther's decision to boycott 1973 Lok Sabha by-election of Bombay Municipal

[9] See Dipesh Chakrabarty ("The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropoecene"), Sara Ahmed ("The Performativity of Disgust," *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*), and Martha C. Nussbaum (*Hiding from Humanity*).

[10] Trans., Charudatta Bhagat. Published, *Poisoned Bread*. Ed., Dangle, 41.

Corporation. It was an act of protest against all political parties, including communist parties, which were too caught up in electoral politics to pay heed to Dalit issues ("Attack on Dalit Panthers" 51-52). Dalit Panthers believed, elections were a waste of economic resources in a country where millions starve, and specifically, since elections were contested basis religious and caste identities.

Since the movement acquired initial spontaneous participation from masses, the organization lacked individual commitment and determination (Murugkar 129). While the movement began to lose grip amidst internal conflict, government began to arrest leaders and enmesh them in lengthy, expensive legal battles. This was also initiated to curb their growing political influence, as by then, the organization already built ward-wise units, and leaders addressed six or seven street corner meetings a day ("Attack on Dalit Panthers" 51-52). Panthers pointed out that government's oppressive tactics were to defame the movement and tag leaders as miscreants. However, Panthers' use of crude language in speeches did not sit well with progressive intellectuals and the movement risked alienation even from allies (Murugkar 123).

Conclusion

I must conclude by suggesting, Dalit narratives of self-assertion, much of which begin with relaying one's struggles to move out of the clutches of poverty, needs empathetic reading. In Sharankumar Limbale warns us of faulty assessment of Dalit writings if we read Dalit literature through lenses of upper caste privileges or established literary frameworks (Limbale). Poverty is criminalized and writings that describe deprivation evokes fear for the unknown lives of marginal communities, thus provoking absolute disregard for them without understanding other nuances of poverty that is marked by lack of choices to achieve satisfactory living conditions. Their alienation from natural resources (land, water, agricultural implements) and to sustain Dalit identity politics, social climbing becomes necessary. To better one's living conditions and move out of relative deprivation, marginal communities emulate dominant culture and use upper caste lifestyle as reference points (Guru). However, reference groups prevent social mobility to preserve social fabric and sanctity of imagined territories. Gopal Guru opines, a negative utopia is formed through the subversive role that State plays in keeping relative deprivation active among the downtrodden. As a welfarist strategy, State ensures systematic transfer of resources from privileged to underprivileged sections. But such

appeasement policies discredit radical movements by diffusing dissatisfaction of deprived individuals from developing hurt and social consciousness against dominant elite classes.

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