



Burning Languages: Aesthetics and Politics in the Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal

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I walk out of murders and riots
I fall out of smouldering biographies
I sleep on a bed of burning languages
 - Dilip Chitre (1980)

The publication of *Golpitha* (1972), a slim collection of Marathi poems, marked the emergence of a stunningly new poetic voice. Its author, Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014), was a young, working-class, Dalit denizen of Mumbai's underworld, whose poetry created shock-waves in the domain of culture; even as Dalit Panther, a militant activist organisation which he co-founded in the same year, shook up the political sphere. Three years later, avant garde French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Felix Guattari (1930-1992) published *Kafka - Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). As the duo famously claimed, 'There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: 26).

Dhasal's poetic practice marked a radical rupture in the Marathi poets' quest for modernity in the post-Independence era. I seek to read it through the conceptual lenses forged by Deleuze and Guattari. The aim is to explore the poetics and politics of Dhasal's oeuvre by placing it in a broader literary and political landscape, and by scrutinising it in terms of the primary characteristics of 'minor literature' adumbrated by the two French thinkers.

Deleuze and Guattari define a minor literature as one that a minority constructs within a major language; for example, the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague. It involves the use of a language affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialisation, such as Prague German for the Jews or English for the African Americans. Minor literature establishes a necessary and explicit connection between individual concerns (like the family) and larger power formations: commercial, economic, bureaucratic and juridical. It reveals a collective, even revolutionary orientation and enunciation geared to the generation of an alternative community and consciousness.

Namdeo Dhasal wrote in his mother tongue, Marathi – the official language of Maharashtra with a millennium-long, rich literary tradition – which has over 80 million speakers, and is among the 20 most widely spoken languages in the world. Despite its multicultural heritage, the territory of modern Marathi literature, and of poetry in particular, bore the strong impress of an upper-caste, bourgeois life-world. Consequently, mainstream literary Marathi was in a sense a ‘paper language’ to Dhasal as Prague German was to Kafka– an artificial language sundered from the masses. While Kafka accepted the ‘poverty’ of the inherited language, Dhasal infused into Marathi poetry a deeply unsettling diction and register springing from and bodying forth his teeming, polyglot, subaltern milieu. Hence his startling assertion: “I am a venereal sore in the private part of language” (‘Kraurya’/GB/64; ND/100).

Dhasal’s deterritorialising aesthetics drew nourishment from a variety of literary sources including the work of medieval Marathi saint-poets, indigenous orature as well as modernist poetry from the world over, and the small but significant corpus produced by older confreres like Narayan Surve (1926–2010), a poet of the proletariat, and the bohemian experimentalist Manohar Oak (1933–1993). In his minoritarian verse, Marathi poetry lost the measured cadences of conventional poetic practice that lulled the reader into a blissful stupor; instead, it ‘stuttered’ à la Deleuze (1997), unravelling the syntax of social domination:

Their orthodox pity is no taller than a Falkland Road pimp
 It’s true, they haven’t raised any ceremonial tent for us in the sky
 After all, they are the feudal lords; they’ve locked all light in their vault

In this lowered life imposed on us, not even a pavement belongs to us
(‘Tyanchi Sanatan Daya’/G/1; ND/47)

Golpitha is dedicated to “all the movements and currents of thought, big or small, which seek to blast the exploitative system that deprives the ordinary person of power, wealth and dignity”. Quite in keeping with the spirit of this dedication, a critical concern with the political informs and illuminates even the most intimate moments in Dhasal’s poetry. A poem containing a son’s poignant meditation on the life and death of his father, who was a stonemason, culminates in a cry of strident rebellion against the society that had condemned him to unremitting toil:

Stonemasons impart dreams to stones
I light sparklers
It is bad form to peer into one’s father’s life
But that’s just what I do
And rummage through its nooks and crannies
(...)
Stonemasons dissolve stones into their blood
I carry stones
Stonemasons build a house of stone
I break a head with a stone
(‘Bap, Vadari ani Me...Yanchi Kavita’/G/37)

Several poems express great tenderness for women, along with a tragic awareness of their fate in a cruelly patriarchal world:

Manda
Your mind is neither of ash nor of marble
I feel your hair, your clothes, your nails, your breasts
as though they were my own: they reveal to me, within myself
colonies of the dead; hunchbacks left to die in the streets;
Sandwiches; streets; milk of a she-dog that’s just given birth to her litter
(...)
Never before had I seen a face so devoid of light
As was yours; and of a thousand other females like you.

Flashing out from so many countries, and so many cages;
 And bearing so many different names.
 ('Mandakini Patil'/G/57; ND/56-57)

A 'collective assemblage' emerges in Dhasal's poems that voice the millennial suffering of oppressed people:

O torturers
 There is no duty in this world more graceful than giving a gift of water
 When there is a shortage of water
 You change your city as you would change your shirt
 Tell us, then,
 What should they change
 Who thirst and die without water?
 ('Water'/G/65; ND/46)

A passionate agonism is at work in Dhasal's poetry which conjures up 'war machines' or communities of resistance seeking to target an array of hegemonic social structures undergirding the State:

O innumerable suns blazing in my blood
 Your mothers and sisters are still violated in bazaars
 Neros still run amok like rogues, brazenly torching people in public squares
 Your hovels are still bulldozed
 For laying claim to a loaf of bread or a fistful of water
 (...)
 Oh look, the earth's pride has risen up and filled the sky
 My soul too has raised the cry of revolt
 O innumerable suns blazing in my blood
 Now go forth and set the city on fire.
 ('Raktat Petalelya Aganit Suryanno'/G/13)

Not content with a critique of class, caste and gender oppression, Dhasal charts a path of praxis, explicitly drawing on a rich revolutionary heritage:

And visions of these sages spring from my bones
 First, Ambedkar, my militant gene
 Second, Marx, my profound, mature soul
 Third, Mao, my pervasive skin
 Not colour but conviction
 Not nakedness but action
 We are soldiers, makers of a new world
 This is our fervent long march
 ('Comrade Arthat Bara Balutedaransathi'/G/68-69).

The dialectics of emancipation embodied in Dhasal's oeuvre foregrounds the moment of destruction; but it also projects an intensely appealing if tremulous vision of the community to come:

Launch a campaign for not growing food, kill people all and sundry by
 starving them to death
 Kill oneself too, let disease thrive, make all trees leafless
 Take care that no bird ever sings, man, one should plan to die groaning and
 screaming in pain
 (...)
 After this they should stop calling one another names – white or black,
 brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya or shudra;
 Stop creating political parties, stop building property (...)
 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 ('Mansane'/G/32;
 ND/36).

Dhasal's poetic vision, at once radical and generous, found an echo in the Dalit Panther Manifesto (1973) which defined the category 'Dalit' as follows: "Members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion". It went on to chart the path of Dalit

emancipation by asserting the need to bring about a ‘complete revolution’: “We do not want a little place in the brahmin alley. We want to rule the whole country. We are not looking at persons but at a system...*our ideas of social revolution and rebellion will...sprout in the soil, flower in the mind and then will come forward with full force with the help of steel-strong means*” (emphasis added).

At a time when crass majoritarianism casts a long shadow, the minoritarian interventions of Dhasal, Deleuze and Guattari recall a past pregnant with emancipatory possibilities – a past which is waiting to be “blasted out of the continuum of history” (Benjamin, 1969: 261).

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Primary Texts:

G = *Golpitha* – Namdeo Dhasal (Pune: Nilakantha Prakashan, 1975/1972)

GB = *Gandu Bagicha* – Namdeo Dhasal (Mumbai: Ambedkar Prabodhini, 1986)

ND = *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld* – Dilip Chitre and Henning Stegmueller (Chennai: Navayana, 2007)

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