

The Poetics of Societal Hypoxia

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Abstract: *The present paper will study poetic vision of the outcaste, marginalized, oppressed and exploited people who long for certainty of life and sustain 'lifeworld' of their own. But, they failed to do and achieve their goals. They have bitter experience of living in the society of the hegemony of powerful societal authorities. They have nothing to express but anger and aggression; threat and identity struggle born out of grief they have to the core of heart. The paper will define these experiences projected in poetic expressions as poetics of societal hypoxia. Dalit literature and Dalit writers demand for a separate canon as aesthetics of literature is example of the poetics of societal hypoxia.*

Keywords: *Dalit, Dalit Vision, Dalit literature, outcaste groan, grief of being marginalized, societal hypoxia, Dalit lifeworld, Omprakash Valmiki, Marathi Dalit Poetry, translators of Dalit poetry, Dalit Aesthetics, Fanon, the question of the Black, Arjun Dangle, B.R. Ambedkar, subaltern.*

The Poetics of Societal Hypoxia Man is the Storytelling Animal, and that in stories are his identity, his meaning, and his lifeblood.

--Salman Rushdie in *Luka and the Fire of Life*

The subject of the poetics of societal hypoxia is the wounded subjectivity and deprivation. These two subjects are the key points of understanding the identity discourses, be it race, nation, gender, minority, or be it ethnic discourses. Dalit writing is also stratified among them.

All works that come under the umbrella of Dalit *sahitya* are autobiographic. In fact, Dalit Sahitya has started with autobiographical expositions. It does not concern with anything but reasons and the aftereffects of social exploitations. Subjectivity under threat and danger is portrayed in all genres of dalit literature whether it is poetry, short story, fiction or drama. So, before going further, we should understand what sort of subjectivity Dalit writers have expressed.

Subjectivity refers to identity of the self. Let us understand this term. It is an answer to the self-questioned rhetoric for the worldly sense of who I am. Am I or not? If, yes, then, what? And, if the answer does not suit to him or her, he or she tries to achieve a satisfactory position where he or she can justify his or her free will. It is very common to think or letting our mind to think about identity. Today's society demands it. And, in order to fulfill this social demand, people of the last and present century started to break down traditional approaches to see man, and social and religious fanatic senses.

Legal and Social historian Lawrence M. Freedman thinks it as the result of a gradual move from a "vertical" (hierarchical, inflexible) to a more "horizontal" (negotiable, agency-driven) mode of life. He posits this idea, in his *The Horizontal Society*, on the basis of an assertion that we live in an age "in which old forms and traditions seem to be breaking down –forms and traditions that trapped the individual in a cage of ascription; that mixed human beings in definite social roles, pinned them to a given position in the world, no matter how they might wriggle and fight". (Friedman XII-VIII)

We do not deal only with philosophy of the self but also with the idea of the self, rather say, general idea of the self and self-identity. We shall neither discuss Cartesian concept of “I”, Nietzschean “I” embedded with ‘will to power’, Machiavellian “I” with or without ‘virtu’ nor the “I” concept of the exiled authors, but, with the self that has seen itself to being suffered and humiliated, insulted, boycotted dalit self – the bewildered-self who learned how to defy the human system. The presence of subjectivity is a natural incident in the writing but dalit subjectivity is different from subjectivity of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Marlowe’s James Faustus, Wordsworthian personality theory in poetry, and subjectivities of Hindi Chayavadis (a period of Hindi Romanticism) and other post-shukla Hindi periods.

The paper does not concern with caste or class as subject matter of the *Dalit Sahitya* as it is defined till the period of *Mudrarakshasa*. The reason being, it is class, caste, and race oriented conjecture. In postmodern era, better say, in the era of climate change, *dalit-sahitya* needs to be redefined and re-essentialised in broader senses. It must be seen as a literature of marginalized within and outside marginalized people of the society. ‘Dalit’ is a hindi word, specifying a particular group existing in the society living without any societal, moral, or religious support of upper. It is not only eventuated in India but also in other countries.

Dalit Sahitya, is, for example, defined in specific context of hyper-realities of Indian people who have never thought as the part of mainstream societies, described as victims of ‘societal hypoxia’, that is, as human body requires sufficient oxygen to make his tissues alive so human mind requires society—rather say, better society—to live and learn as a rational human being. Boycotted people are always found in the state of ‘societal hypoxia’, because they are living being deprived of society, to say, excommunicated from leading social group that could have produced them as an unabated men of society.

The major cause of ‘societal hypoxia’ is snatched rights of the oppressed or the outcaste people based on racial, ethnic, social, religious, caste discrimination. The victim of discrimination and excommunication survives, or say, has to survive under the sun without fresh air of liberty. Mass expulsion from the state of rational human being, decides the ways to death. This ostracism overlaid the lives with alienation. This alienation took a new face in the course of time, we may call it aggressive detest of alienation which help someone to become autobiographic narrator against egomaniac social system.

Writing or describing dalit as an Indian being is nothing but an attempt of demarcation which makes Dalit Sahitya meager and limited. To describe alienation, helplessness, papacy, or pictorial images of frustrated social being in hypocandriac and hypermetropiac mannerisms to produce sympathy or empathy in reader or audience are but descriptions not literature. Literature includes all that is sympathetic and unsympathetic at the same time.

Literature touched the untouchable parts of the lives and their concerns. It communicates about the underprivileged, marginalised, uprooted and unrated society and its integral i.e. individual. It gives language to the dumb- excommunicated-people living under what Eqbal Ahmad said, “the pathology of power.” Contemporary history tells about the world running under the threats of conflicts arising chiefly from two extreme volatile but sensitive reasons: the poor and the woman. Both, the poor and the woman have deconstructive phenomena; have connotation and ambiguous encapsulation of interpretation and facilitators of the poetics of societal hypoxia.

Let us understand the term ‘the poor’. The definition has been changed as it must be changed unphilosophically. Individuals minus money are considered the poor in Adam Smithian sense. Individuals minus money and social status are defined the poor in Hegel Marxian sense. Individuals minus intervening capacity in the civil society political affairs and policy makers are the poor in postmodern Indian term. But in all the senses the poor must be defined as individuals under unsupported, marginalised, oppressed, depressed, underprivileged, deprived and helpless conditions. The poor is a residual category of the society. It is the category which emerges not from caste-system but the political system. Such individuals can be defined as victims of societal hypoxia. For example, many Rajputs residing in India are living under pettiest conditions though they are never counted among population of the poor and deprived. Such Rajputs are so conditioned because of the activities of other people belonging to the same social group/community i.e. Rajput. The Rajput, as it is generally understood in Indian society, is root

cause of unjustified social stratification, distraction and discretion. But, now through some desanscretization processes they became poor and weak. There are voluminous examples of the poor Rajputs in the Indus society.

Thus, the poor word does not consist of caste or caste-system but status of population. It is entirely different from what Hutton enumerated for the depressed class people in thirties.

Names like Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire; Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon¹; and Richard Wright and James Baldwin are nomenclatures of antiracist revolution in the metaphysics of revolutions of the poor community. In India, as Dalit literary critic agree with facts that Dalits in India are not only under rated by discriminating so-called divine words but also by contemporary Hindi authors and critics. Omprakash Valmiki, famous author of Dalits and one of leading writers of the Dalit, wrote *Dalit Shahitya ka Saundaryashashtra* (Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) that Dalit Literature has its own school of impact and impression, it has its own aestheticism. It deserves to get its separate issues. (Valmiki 45-51)

But, the question remains why dalit *sahitya* authors ask to see Dalit *sahitya* in its own aesthetical framework. The one who does not know the tradition of *sahitya* (literature) or its traditionality, its myth, its legends, its history, its predecessors and contemporaries and its integral concerns, one commits mistakes while the framework of aesthetics or literature.

The high modernist literary critic, T.S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent", emphasizes on the importance of tradition conceptualizing it as heritage for a creative writer and reader. To him, tradition gives the reader the power to imagine and his individual talent lies in his individuality, being, 'platinum of shred' among literary chemical elements for innumerable implications and experiments further.(Eliot)

The Sanskrit, Hindi, and Marathi literature has great history of culture and great tradition of effect. Its effective force lies in ideas embedded in sublime language. Its impartial observation of society represents contemporaneity. Its tangibility is still alive in words due only to its truthfulness, communicability of emotions in words which compel us to experience the actual realization of the self of the reader. There is no canon which does not expose the reasons of arising pathos in human society including social pathos. But, Dalit literature has its different aesthetic effect defying the *rasa* theories and purity of figurative language and diction. They prefer to write in a language which can openly express their pain and suffering causing the conation for rebel and revenge attitude. Conation² is a mental process that makes you want to do something or decide to do something. It is made up of Latin, *conatio*, from *conari* which signifies "to try".

It is the first stage of Dalits' attempt of awareness. It teaches *Dalits* to condone that makes them rebellious to say 'cannot condone any behavior that discriminates man from man racially, socially, politically and theologically. *Dalit* literature especially 'autobiography' is the result of this psychological process of Dalits. Dalit literature, better to say, Dalit genre has conspecificity of emotions and experiences. They see the society and system as institutions for other. Ramifications of such thought yielded a large number of complicated and unexpected results in the form of literary discourse of disparity. Budhsaran Hans's "Murdered Identity"³ is one of the finest examples to answer why Dalit writers imagine for producing Dalit Aesthetics as a distinct school of literature.(Hans 86-96)

Dalits are shown as sympathetic commodity in the history of Indian literature. Premchand, for example, sketched Dalit lifeworld as expatriate in their own village, city, district, state and country. But, for the Dalit writers, it was not enough to produce sympathy in the audience or reader for the depressed class but to produce fear in the oppressive class. They denied to observe Premchand a writer for outcaste and fought for literature of their own. They were victims of *Brāhamaṇic* Scholasticism and Schism of upper class people. We can have many illustrations in this regard.

Yashwant Manohar's *An Ultimatum* expresses the mood of repentance on his birth as human being and angst while living alone among people:

... what if I raise a piteous cry
In this well-appointed cemetery
Or rage against this settlement
Of leafless cannibal trees,
tell me what seas would cool this burn
Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn. (Dangle)

Manohar pours out his grief of being alone among people:

I feel a foreigner among the people.
Bearing the burden of such a bastard life(Dangle)⁴

Vaharu Sonawane's *In the Lush Green Jungle* tries to sketch the reality of Dalit as a player of 'primitive communism and slavery'. In these lines, Vaharu poeticizes Fanon's experience as a Black among the White. Fanon expresses this experience of excommunication based on racial discrimination politics. 'Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty'.

In the lush green jungle
those tattered huts
like scattered teak leaves.(Dangle 25)

He characterizes the world as a 'wild wood' full of 'wild people'. This negativism developed perseverance in the dalit authors. In Dalit writing we may trace out the sense of perseverance as the power of dalitness.

In that wild wood, wild people
eating roots and bulbs
But ...
No bulbs. No roots.(Dangle)⁵
All vanished long before
Into the hollow stomach
of a fearsome hunger.
In the green jungle
Naked children
Playing games
Of primitive communism
And slavery
in the mud before their huts.(Dangle)⁶

Waman Nimbalkar's "Mother" expresses the same emotion:

Daylight would die. Darkness would reign.
We at our hut's door. No single light inside.
Lights burning in houses around (Dangle 43)

But, there is no guardian of society to see and improve. Arjun Dangle's "I will Belong to It" expresses the epileptic and diseased condition of the society and country. He throws light on unheard condition of the Dalit; no-belongingness, aggressive mood for the social exclusion, the sense of nonbeing, indignant unsocietal persona standing to face challenges to the politics of survival with perseverance:

To whom... to whom...shall I tell?

In this land of fifty-eight crores

This is how I must continue to live.(Dangle 47)

Here he attacks on civil societies, organization and institution:

Who will listen to whose agony.

In this destiny of people?

I want a life,

that has a vital sap.

I want a soil

That, smeared on the brow,

Will bring tears to the eyes”

He wants a name, an identity, a lifeworld made of his expectation and attempt:

...whose meaning may engrave itself upon my heart,

and gently blow my endless pain.(Dangle 48)

Sharankumar Limbale’s “White Paper” expresses his demand for rights as a man:

My rights: contagious caste riots

Fastering city by city, village by village,

Man by man

The poetics of hypoxia expresses the protest with threatening tone. Limbale and Bagul use powerful and direct expression of dissatisfaction with threatening tone.

Will you deny this incendiary state of things?

I’ll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks

Burn like a city bus your lawless laws(Dangle 75)

Bagul offers his people (Dalits) two options for the fittest survival in the country:

...either leave the country,

Or make a war. (Dangle 80)⁷

Suresh Kadam’s “To Dear Aana” and Jyoti Lanjewar’s ‘Caves’ express the result of insinuation of social system:

Society, bound by her rituals of ages,

Chew up chunks of human flesh

In blind fury. (Dangle 38)

Uttam Kolgaokar’s “His House” unknots the mystery to the result of orthodox societal practices and policies made many inhabitants homeless at village:

He was born here,

But did not belong here...(Dangle 37)

Jyoti Lanjewar’s “Caves” shows the protesting mind of the bearer of perseverance:

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves

In the rock of my heart

...

I have been silent all these days

...

But, now I will fan the flames

For human rights

...

I hold their unpardonable sins as witness

And turn, here and now,

A rebel.⁸

In fact, Dalit Movement is a clarion for the protest against fanaticism of *Brāhamahism*. Pariahs were entitled to become nothing but Dalits for their crushed and broken conditions due to 'scissor-hold move' of fate as compulsion. They were under compulsions that became the root cause of confabulations of pain, agony, disappointment, regular displacement, homelessness in their own village into words. They use dialogic language to represent chronotope of their suffering. These diegetic words of Baburao Bagul reflect the identity of the untouchable:

Those who leave for foreign lands,

Embrace other tongues, dress in alien garb

And forget this country

--them I salute.

And those who don't forget,

And don't change even after being beaten up for centuries

such hypocrites I ask:

What will you say if someone asked you—

What is untouchability?

Is it eternal like God?

What's an untouchable like? What does he look like?

Does he look like the very image of leprosy?

Or like the prophet's enemy?

Does he look like a heroic, a sinner, a profligate, or atheist?

Tell me,

What will your answer be?

Will you reply without hesitation:

'Untouchability – that's me?' (Dangle 80)

Bagul speaks out of a war against so called system of Indian society. In Dalit writing, it is also common to find out the subject of violence-back.

That's why I say—

You who have made the mistake of being born in this country

Must now rectify it: either leave the country,

or make war! (Dangle 81)⁹

The poetics of societal hypoxia does not limit to the Dalit poetry but may cover imagination of the outcaste, imagination of facts and future of the outcaste, exploitation, and oppression based on gender, racial, ethnic, and societal, sexual and caste discrimination –be it the Black, Minorities, Subaltern, Women or Dalit. Writings of the victims of discrimination and the bearer of perseverance maybe called the poetics of societal hypoxia, because they are born of the victim of politics of oppression and exploitation.

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Notes

- ¹ Fanon in his essay, "The facts of Blackness" raises questions related to the identity of the Black and conceded Blackness as strength of his race.
- ² Conation is an uncommon word, mostly used in psychology and philosophy when tripartite process of mind driving our intention, volition, act of willing.
- ³ Hans, founder of Ambedkar Vichar Manch and Ambedkar Mission Patrika, was an editor, poet, short story writer used his pen power to satirise *Brāhamaic* social system. I translated his short story entitled *asmita lahu luhan* as "Murdered Identity" (heretofore).
- ⁴ translated from Marathi by Charudatta Bhagwat, *Poisoned Bread*: 15
- ⁵ translated from Marathi by Charudatta Bhagwat, *Poisoned Bread*: 15
- ⁶ Translated from Marathi by Priya Adarkar, *Poisoned Bread*: 21
- ⁷ "You who have Made the Mistake" trans. Vilas Sarang
- ⁸ Translated by shanta gokhle, *Poisoned Bread*:23
- ⁹ trans by Vilas Sarang in *Poisoned Bread*: 70