

Dalits and Blackness: The Politics and Aesthetics of Blackness in Select Dalit Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled “Dalits and Blackness: The Politics and Aesthetics of Blackness in Select Dalit Poetry” is an attempt to explore discursive blackness and to analyse its political and aesthetic underpinnings in Dalit poetical texts. Poetry plays a significant role in establishing black identity and the spirit of rebellion. The study also aims to look at the ideological, cultural and political overtones of and the polemic contestations implied in select poems of Dalit writings. Dalit poetry is also instilled in the spirit of revolt and it acts as a vehicle of revolution, change, consciousness-raising, struggle and social commitment. The dishonour inflicted on Dalits is rooted in casteism. So many Dalit poets try to express their anger and frustration against this oppression through their poetry and exhort the dalits to take pride in their black colour and make it a weapon of rebellious spirit to wipe out the domination over them. The poems written by Dalit poets like Keshav Meshram, Vilas Rashinkar, Dharmaraj Nimsarkar, B. Rangarao, G. Sasi Madhuraveli, and K. K. S. Das are taken for analysis in this study. The selected of poems showcase the black consciousness ingrained in the dalit mind as a result of the subjugation by the upper caste people. The study concludes by identifying black poetry as a body of psychological and social documents which contest, confront, critique and problematize the elitist assumptions about whiteness and prejudices about blackness.

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Colour is indeed a poignant marker of one's identity. Many things around us are identified by their colour. In that way, blackness has also become a marker of identity. In the case of human beings, being black is a physical trait or a part of his physical appearance. It is not one's own choice. It is a racial character. Black identity, for Fanon, is marked by self-division. "The white man is sealed in his whiteness; the black man in his blackness" (Fanon 9). A black man's identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power. He is forced to see himself not as a human subject, but an object, a peculiarity at the mercy of a group that identifies him as inferior, less than fully human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations. The power of description, of naming, is not to be underestimated. The relationship between language and power is far-reaching and fundamental. The paper is an attempt to explore discursive blackness and to analyse its political and aesthetic underpinnings of blackness in select Dalit poetical texts.

Frantz Fanon argues that what a black man wants to be is to become a white man. This pathological desire is forced on the black people by white colonisation and European culture. "White men consider themselves superior to black men"(10). Fanon believes that black man's neurosis stems not out of his family based events but from the traumatizing contact with the white world that despises them. The man of colour finds himself dissected by White gaze and his body and individuality annihilated. As recounted by Fanon, the trauma of blackness lies in the absolute otherness in relation to the white man. That is, the white man makes the black man by recognising only his skin. The experiences of the Afro-Americans and the dalits in India have many similarities.

While the oppression and humiliation suffered by the Blacks is rooted on racial grounds, the subjugation inflicted on the dalits is a question of caste. One's caste is decided by one's birth. The Afro-American writers were a source of inspiration for the dalits especially in the treatment of suffering and identity. Compared to America, the amount of literature produced by the dalits in India is less. The idiom "Dalit" represents a political identity rather than just a caste name. The word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means "broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed." "Dalit" refers to one's caste rather than class; it applies to members of those menial castes which have born the stigma of "untouchability" because of the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations. In India, the untouchables were perceived as inferior on the basis of their birth in an 'avarna' caste which can be regarded as an intricate web of Karmic laws created to permanently subjugate them to the lower strata of society. Gandhi described untouchables as 'harijan'. The term 'harijan' literally means children of God. Ambedkar

rejected this name for being Hindu and for being patronizing and derogatory. Gandhi argued that untouchables are an inseparable part of Hindu society. The only aspect of the varna order that he opposed was untouchability, which he looked at as ‘inhuman’ and ‘a blot’ on Hinduism. Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi and gave a call for the annihilation of caste.

Like the blacks, dalits also suffered from slavery in ancient times from the savarna sections in society. Jotiba Phule sought to unite the shudras and ati-shudras. He argues that shudras and ati-shudras together represented an orthodox and exploited mass, compared their subordination with that of the native Indians in America and the Blacks. “Phule’s theory can be looked at as a kind of incipient historical materialism in which economic exploitation and cultural dominance are interwoven” (Omvedt 26). Dalits have been demoralised to an extent that they took a long time to develop resistance to manipulation. Untouchability can be regarded as a condition of existence as well as a violent expression of power. “Whatever its structural correlates, untouchability is essentially an experience of wounding, of wilful hurt, through which the outcaste body becomes a stranger to itself, and is ever ready to fall off the edge, give into anomie and fragmentation” (Guru 97). An untouchable is deprived of his liberty indirectly and hence unconscious of his enslavement. The untouchables who have the greatest stake in challenging it are subject to merciless logic, and reproduce among themselves the vicious logic of graded inequality.

Dalits are oppressed because of their caste, economic backwardness, colour etc. All dalits are not black in colour. But quite often, blackness also becomes an attribute of Dalit identity. It will be an irony if one associates whiteness and light with dalits. When we explore Dalit writings, we can understand the pain and oppression suffered by the dalits as a part of

their black appearance. Dalits are exploited in terms of their blackness and their colour also becomes a tool of caste oppression. Though we can argue that the savarnas also contain black as well as white coloured people, they stand superior in the caste hierarchy and their colour is not called into question. But since the dalits are the marginalised sections of the society their colour becomes a marker of their marginalised identity. The colour of the skin thus becomes a defining quality of a person which means that he whose skin is untouchable is himself an untouchable. “The skin as a ‘map of character and moral disposition’ again illustrates how an untouchable’s skin embodies certain moral properties; once untouchability is inscribed on an individual, then the impossibility of crossing the wall of untouchability”(Sarukkai 170). Thus colour of the skin becomes a marker of untouchability and thereby a marker of Dalit identity. The Brahminical mode of conceptual construction presents the untouchable as the combination of multiple stigmatized images which make one, an untouchable, unseeable and unapproachable. This perception of the body of an untouchable results in his treatment as a ‘social danger’. “The untouchable can also resignify his body and use it as a poisoned weapon to create a sense of anxiety in his or her tormentor. It is in this sense that the body of an untouchable becomes a field of an insurmountable conflict”(Guru 14). This is a kind of cultural marginalisation and the Dalits are pushed away from the mainstream.

The need to assert one’s blackness becomes a significant concern. Rebellions and retaliations were made and most of them were quelled by the upper strata of society. So in order to uproot the social evil of untouchability and to remove the apprehensions surrounding blackness, literature becomes an effective tool. The torment and humiliation confronted by the dalits based on their caste and colour find expression in Dalit writings. Thus writing

becomes the true weapon for encountering the marginalisation and making people aware of the problems faced by the downtrodden sections of society. Dalit writings came much later compared to Black literature, but it also foregrounded with profundity the intense trauma suffered by the dalits on the basis of caste and colour. So we can say that the blacks as well as the dalits are subjected to marginalisation on the basis of their colour, even though the Dalit experience is more of a caste-based one. Dalits belong to the subalterns. Antonio Gramsci used the term subaltern interchangeably with 'subordinate' sometimes instrumental to denote non-hegemonic groups or classes. They represent the group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of ruling class elites that denies them the basic rights to participate in social or political or cultural activities. One of the key figures of subaltern studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls for the revision of the term subaltern and argues that subaltern is no longer cut off from the line of access to centre. Today the centre itself is interested in the rural and indigenous subaltern as they are source of a trade-related intellectual property. Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" further argues that a subaltern cannot speak and is devoid of agency. Likewise, the blacks and dalits are marginalised and are excluded from possessing the agency to speak for them in a hegemonic society.

As a means of resistance and revolt against this marginalisation, the oppressed classes began to respond through literature. Dalit writers also have articulated their miserable plight through their poetry, fiction and autobiographies. The pain and humiliation inflicted on these oppressed classes based on blackness are well explored through poetry. The black complexion became a tool by which the upper sections of the society tried to denigrate the

lower sections. But in Dalit poetry we can also see that the poets identify blackness as a source of their power and rebellious spirit. As proposed by the concept of negritude, these people accept their black identity and try to assert it through their writings. A spirit of unity is also brought about through this assertion. “These black men are addressing themselves to black men about black men; their poetry is neither satiric nor imprecatory: it is an awakening to consciousness”(Sartre 293). So poetry which asserts black identity instils the sense of black consciousness. Instead of considering blackness as a marker of their subordinate position such poetry asserts it as a sense of pride which leads them forward as a class with self-consciousness.

Much of the body of Dalit poetry emphasised on the oppression they had to suffer on various grounds. Though we cannot say that all dalits are blacks, it is indeed a fact that blackness is also one of the attributes of identity of a marginalised lot like dalits. Many Dalit poems contain references to their black complexion and the humiliation they had to encounter on the basis of their colour. They are doomed to darkness in a society where their rights are subjugated and they are subordinated. The darkness linked with them points to their dark coloured existence too. There are many black people among the upper castes, but they are not side-lined because of their colour. But since the dalits represent the marginalised lot, they are suppressed on the grounds on colour. The sense of pain inflicted as a part of the colour pretensions finds expression in Dalit poetry. RaghavanAtholi in an interview speaks about the aesthetics of blackness that characterises his works. For him, ‘black’ is a powerful symbol that overcomes even the national boundaries of the possibility of the word ‘Dalit’. He says,

“My heart pulsates when I hear Jackson sing. Blackness is a representational term that unifies oppressed people the world over”(Satyanarayana 147).

An analysis of some of the Dalit poems shows how the Dalit poetry enables them to contest the colour prejudices of the upper castes in society as well as the literature produced by them. In these poems, we can find that the dalits try to carve out the humiliation they had to face in the name of their black colour and the need to realise the power of blacks as a community that can tremble the elitist class. The poems taken for analysis differ in their themes and treatment but assert the black identity and emphasise the dark spaces of Dalit existence. A study of some poems of Dalit literature helps to look at the ideological, cultural and political underpinnings of and the polemic contestations of blackness implied in Dalit writings.

Keshav Meshram’s poem “In Our Colony” presents the picture of a Dalit colony where the postman gets bamboozled, teaching gets confused and civilization is stumbled. The poet says that even the sun is darkened. This indicated the sense of darkness imposed on the dalits. The sun which is the source of light is darkened in the Dalit colony. The contrast that entails a darkening sun itself is a powerful image of the denigration of Dalit identity as blacks. The poet also mentions about the Dalit soul that wishes to swim along the current in the midst of all this oppression. In the second stanza of the poem, he writes:

Our Colony-

A roaring, foaming, riotous sea

Of black bodies and black hair,

Wearing away in the moulds of tradition

Sinking in the soil.(10-14)

Dalits are represented as furious black bodies roaring and rebelling to get liberated from the clutches of caste system. Traditions have torn them apart and they are now sinking in their soil. The poet further presents the hard labour of the Dalit peasants and the torment suffered by the poor children. The poet says that his colony is “drowned in the pegs of ‘country’ wine subsisting on the hot chilled pieces of meat”. The poet says the blackness of their skin shows the hard labour that they do and it may be the result of their exposure to the scorching hot sun. In spite of this, their masters turn their colour into a tool to subjugate them.

“No Entry for the New Sun” is a poem written by Vilas Rashinkar which establishes that the land and its history belong to the black dalits. The poem in a way presents a number of images signifying blackness and darkness. ‘Sun’ in the poem stands for the oppressor and the poet says that with determination a hundred Dalit tongues will spit on the sun. The rebellious spirit is evident in the poem. The under-privileged sections will unwrap the scriptures from their protective covers and will insist that ‘these are commandments engraved on stone’. Then the poet presents some figures of blackness like the pitch-black tunnels, ashes, jet-black water etc. Dalit history remains hidden in pitch-black tunnels and by gathering the ashes floating on the jet-black water, they could reconstruct the skeletons of their ancestors and they could sing hymns of their thoughts. The ashes floating on jet-black water symbolises the memories of the struggles of the black lower class dalits. The poet asserts that there is no entry for a new sun. In the concluding part of the poem, he writes,

This is the empire
of ancestor-worship,

of blackened castoffs,

of darkness. (25-28)

The poet asserts that there is no place for hegemony and domination in his empire. His empire is an empire of darkness and black souls. It is a place where the ancestors are worshipped. The poem asserts black identity and it brings about a sense of a rebellious spirit that can unite the blacks to struggle for their rights and to establish an empire of their own. The poem is indeed a clarion call to wipe out upper caste domination and to establish an empire where the black ancestors and the history of the dalits find recognition and expression.

“Experiment” by Dharmaraj Nimsarkar deals with an experiment to change the existing hegemonic conventions of society. He speaks about experiments that are bound to recur again and again. He writes,

time and again, of picking suns

From the dead blackness of blood

and painting days

on the canvas of darkness. (2-6)

The poet presents the image of dark blood to emphasise the need to establish Dalit existence in society. Dalit life is doomed in darkness and days of light should be painted by changing the conventions of society. He argues that his protests are wordless and his complaints have no voice. He adds that the darkness of the night knows no direction. Sometimes thorns of a helpless mind that could not do anything prick the speaker. The thorns growing on the skin connote to the prejudices afflicted on the dark skin. He says that

darkness of his eyes is turned into flame which reduces him to ashes. He says that all these lead to his crematorium as he has no place to dwell and the weary hands longing for acclaim shall rest only when his bowels are plucked out. He emphasises that he is all set for such an experiment.

The poem calls for experiments to resist upper caste oppression and subordination. The blood that spilled over the land belongs to the black people. Dalits were humiliated and suppressed severely. Days on light should be painted on the dark canvas through experiments. If they remain silent, the flames of anger will burn down themselves. He emphasises the need to struggle for their rights. Unless they could experiment to find the space in society, they would not be able to reach anywhere. So Nimsarkar, through his poem, exhorts the dalits to unite and fight to find their space in society.

“On a Desolate Night like This” by B. Rangarao shows a tormented marginalised mind that thinks about his existence and hopes about a dawn in his dark life. “Night” is a symbol of darkness and the speaker says about a desolate night when he could not sleep and thoughts embed sharp claws in the convulsions of his brain. He writes

In the handful of light
loaned by the flickering lamp
I gleam unobstructed
Or else I too would be here invisible
Like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man.(7-11)

The speaker thinks that if he is shaken by the oppression he will also be doomed like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man. The figure of invisible man suggests the darkness that

surrounds a dalit life which denies many rights. He further says that he thinks about the heritage of his race and the gods his mother worships. He mocks that the fraudulent gods are like politicians who come to gather votes. He then says that his night begins to smoulder red-hot like burning coals. Coal is a symbol of blackness. But when it is burnt to red-hot, it possesses virility and power. Likewise, the speaker intends to turn the silenced blacks into red-hot who could challenge the dispensation that marginalises them. He concludes that there is sunrise in his eyes like a doting father released from prison. The yearning for freedom is highlighted by the poet. The release from the darkness of prison life and the light of freedom that should be achieved are emphasised by the poet.

G. SasiMadhuraveli, in his poem “With Love” asserts blackness as a characteristic feature of Dalit identity which makes one beautiful. In the beginning lines of the poem he writes,

Saumini,
Didn't you say that black is beautiful?
And haven't the poets sung so too?
How then were blacks disgraced?(1-4)

The poet asserts the beauty of blackness and the praises showered on it by many poets. In spite of all that the black dalits are subjected to disgrace. The speaker claims that the black people are the lot who drain sweat and blood in the fields and the group which suffer the blazing flames of the sun and the blistering red-hot earth. Invoking the deity, the speaker says that the blacks are shooed away and lack space to hide. The speaker asks the regional deity, Saumini about the chest on which she mounts to cool her rage. The speaker wants the

deity not to merely say or merely sing that black is beautiful. The poet concludes with the lines,

Black is the seed of self-rage

The mount of tumult

The shadow of endurance

The shade of love.(22-25)

Thus the poem becomes a remarkable piece which establishes black identity and exhorts the dalits to take pride in it. Blackness is the source of self-rage and the mount of tumult. It is the shadow of endurance and the shade of love. So, one should have a sense of pride about one's black identity.

“Black Dance” is a poem by K. K. S Das about the ‘Cherumi’ tribe and especially about the life of ‘Cherumi’ women. The poem is simmering with anger-filled exhortations to take revenge on the sabotaging system that deteriorated the conditions of the Dalits. After describing the Cherumi women and her hardships, the poet writes,

You black cubs,

who gave the black soil its colour,

black panthers, red panthers,

Lion cubs.(13-16)

As cubs are the off springs of lions, the term indicates the ferocity associated with the blacks who belong to this soil. It is their hardships that made this land. The poet further describes the pain and sufferings the dalits had to undergo in turning the land into a cultivable one. Even then, the blacks are oppressed. So the poet demands the black skins to shout that

they should take revenge. The policy is like ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. The poet continuously demands the dalits to awake and take revenge. In the concluding part, the poet mentions that Kali sprinkles blood all around and dark ones break into dance. He calls for a revolt from the severed hands and he wants the oppressed masses to rise up and settle the score. The poem is therefore, one which instils the spirit of revolt and the black dance figuratively represents the liberation of the blacks from oppressors.

All these poems try to establish blackness as a part of Dalit identity and it unites the dalits to rebel against the oppressors to earn their rights on their land. “As a body of psychological and social documents, the black poetry expresses the psyche state of the people who are on the point of acquiring self-awareness and beginning to articulate their demand for social and cultural emancipation” (Bajaj 33-34). Blackness is a physical trait, but it carries a lot of significance in the cultural realm. For the dalits, it often becomes an attribute that torments them along with their status of a lower caste in society. The inferior status accorded to dalits on the basis of their colour cannot be ignored when assessing their poetry. It is essential to use a sociological perspective in analysing it because the birth of black poetry is social in nature. There is a common assumption that members of the marginalised group will both ‘want’ and ‘need’ to write autobiographical literature in order to express their experiences of oppression. The poems taken for the study are characterised by the call for self-identity and the assertion of blackness. The selected Dalit poetical texts portray the hapless plight of the dalits who are humiliated and suppressed by their black identity. Some of the poems try to uphold blackness as immense power to rebel against the oppression that they face in society. The oppression suffered by the dalits has relegated them to the very

margin of society. The realities of poverty, oppression, ignorance and ultimate alienation are so compelling that they force a community to strike back. Their bitter experiences resulted out of their dark complexion would only harden them to arise with redefined force and strength to fight it out. Dalit literature is condemned by critics as literature of lament but lately they are occupying the central space in the creative core with a focus shift. The call for self-realisation and self-identity is the hallmark of the new paradigm. Dalit poets argue that their works require an alternative aesthetic paradigm that comprehends Dalit lifestyle and experimental realities. The selected poems indicate how Dalit poetry serve as a weapon to counter the prejudices associated with blackness. Majority of the poems are not concerned much about the poetic craft. Using simple and evocative symbols and images indicating blackness like night, darkness, coal and so, the poems attempt to assert black identity and make an exhortation to celebrate blackness. They effectively critique and counter the negative prejudices about blackness. They propagate the philosophy of optimism and hope which becomes a protective shield that enables them to ward off all kinds of oppression and gain a positive vision of empowerment and pride.

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