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Dismantling the Body: A Dalit Corporeal Analysis of Selected Poems of Namdeo Dhasal

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Démantèlement du corps: Une analyse corporelle dalit des poèmes sélectionnés de Namdeo Dhasal

Résumé

L'article tente une analyse corporelle de poèmes sélectionnés de Namdeo Dhasal dans les paradigmes de la caste et du genre. Cela implique une exploration du concept de corporalité dans un cadre contre-hégémonique dalit, comme une série de sensations non organisées et perpétuellement en état de flux, qu'on lit dans la poésie de Dhasal. La conception de Dhasal du terme "Dalit" fait partie intégrante de l'exploration. En outre, l'analyse de la corporéité en relation avec les poèmes de Dhasal, aide à démêler les complexités de la définition de la caste, et le processus d'exploitation de la caste, qui sont tous deux principalement centrés sur le corps. Enfin, l'article entend appliquer le concept de corporéité à l'espace, en particulier à la ville de Mumbai, qui est le cadre spatial de la plupart des poèmes de Dhasal. L'article suit une méthodologie théorique et analytique. L'exploration théorique implique un engagement soutenu avec l'analyse de la caste par Bali Sahota, et avec des concepts tels que la "sensation", le "rhizome", et le "corps sans organes" proposés par Gilles Deleuze et Felix Guattari. Les interventions théoriques sont testées par une analyse textuelle de poèmes sélectionnés de Dhasal. La théorisation du féminisme dalit de Sharmila Rege et l'analyse d'Ambedkar du lien complexe entre le genre, la sexualité et la caste sont appliquées à une analyse intersectionnelle de la caste et du genre dans la poésie de Dhasal.

Mots-clés : Dalit, caste, corporalité, genre, sensation

Dismantling the Body: A Dalit Corporeal Analysis of Selected Poems of Namdeo Dhasal

Abstract

The paper attempts a corporeal analysis of selected poems of Namdeo Dhasal in the paradigms of caste, and gender. This entails an exploration of the concept of corporeality in a counter-hegemonic Dalit framework, as a series of unorganised sensations perpetually in a state of flux, seen in Dhasal's poetry. Dhasal's conception of

'Dalit' is integral to the exploration. Furthermore, the analysis of corporeality in relation to Dhasal's poems, assists in unpacking the complexities of defining caste, and the process of caste exploitation, both of which are predominantly centred on the body. Finally, the paper intends to apply the concept of corporeality to space, particularly the city of Mumbai, where most of Dhasal's poems are set. The paper follows a theoretical and analytical methodology. The theoretical exploration entails a sustained engagement with Bali Sahota's analysis of caste, and with concepts such as, 'sensation', 'rhizome', and 'body without organs' proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The theoretical interventions are tested by a textual analysis of selected poems of Dhasal. Sharmila Rege's theorisation of Dalit Feminism, and Ambedkar's analysis of the intricate connection between gender, sexuality, and caste are applied for an intersectional analysis of caste and gender in Dhasal's poetry.

Keywords: Dalit, caste, corporeality, gender, sensation

Caste can be concretely experienced only as an embodied state, and in case of the untouchable it makes a disembodied subjectivity difficult, though desirable, to imagine (Sahota, 2008: 201).

Corporeality and embodiment are central to the experience of caste and caste exploitation, as indicated by Bali Sahota in the aforementioned quote. It may be possible to suggest that the term 'Dalit', which implies a broken or beaten down condition, implicates the bent and broken bodies of untouchables and those from the lowest stratum of society, who have faced a lifetime of oppression not merely in terms of social exclusion but also in terms of sanctioned ideological practices of physical violence and exploitation. Moreover, since caste hierarchy is governed by strict rules of purity and pollution, Dalits have further been subjected to a dehumanising devaluation of their physicality, for their very bodies are seen as polluting or contaminating. Arjun Dangle elaborates on the exclusions faced by the untouchables on the basis of their supposedly polluting presence, "[t]reated like animals, they lived apart from the village... [t]heir physical contact was said to 'pollute' the upper castes..." (Dangle, 1992: 235). It could be argued that it is in response to the inscription of violence and marginalisation on the very bodies of Dalits that an entire range of Dalit literature is abound with language and a system of expression that is predominantly guttural, embodied, and often sexualised. As the speaker indicates in one of Namdeo Dhasal's poems: "I am a venereal sore in the private part of language" (Dhasal, 2011: 64).

This paper attempts to place selected poems of Namdeo Dhasal in the above context, and analyse them in the theoretical framework of corporeality by proposing its centrality to Dhasal's definition of caste and the oppression that ensues from it. Namdeo Dhasal was an eminent Dalit activist and poet, known for being one

of the founding members of the Dalit Panthers - a socio-political organisation and movement against upper-caste hierarchy - in Bombay in 1972. Dhasal's conception of Dalit¹, and his poetry derive from his own lived experiences in the marginalised interstices of the city of Mumbai -the slum areas and the red-light district - which house the lowest stratum of the society such as petty thieves, pimps, prostitutes, unemployed youth, and gangsters. Dilip Chitre quotes Dhasal as the latter explains the 'number-two'² world that he comes from, implying not merely a world that thrives on a range of supposedly unauthorised activities in the absence of mainstream support, but also a world that is perpetually inscribed with a sense of all-pervasive subordination: ““This is *do number ki duniya*’, he said, ‘This is the bottom of the world’ [...] I grew up here. [...] They are my people - these lumpen; I am one of them. My poetry is about life here.’” (emphasis in original, Chitre, 2011: 107).

The paper aims to probe into Dhasal's conception of human body and embodiment in a predominantly Dalit context of violence, abjection, and dispossession. It may be suggested that Dhasal's poetry does away with conventions of organisation, unification, and resilience to foreground a corporeality that consists of a series of sensations perpetually in a state of flux or chaos. A connected strand of analysis intends to unpack the gendering of the Dalit body and corporeality in Dhasal's poems in order to attempt an intersectional analysis of caste, gender and sexuality. It would further be imperative to weave in a juxtaposition between body and space, particularly the geographical space of Mumbai, even as Dhasal's poetry often grasps the city in corporeal terms. Finally, the paper aims to weave in the fissures or conflicts in the counter-hegemonic resistance that is often foregrounded corporeally in Dhasal's poetry.

Caste and Embodiment

A significant point of departure would be to probe further the intricacies and complexities of the connection between caste, Dalit identity, and embodiment, and to further analyse Dhasal's response to this connection.

Waman Nimbalkar in his poem, “Caste”, ingeniously alters the reconfigurations of interrogating the concept and process of caste by asking: “How is Caste? Where is it? (Nimbalkar, 1992: 123). By substituting the conventional interrogative for information and definition, ‘what’, with ‘how’ and ‘where’, the poem unpacks the ambiguous and irrational foundation of a system of exclusion that is supposedly founded on birth but encapsulates an embodied “pre-conceptual attunement to one's place in the world, an inheritance of practices that constitute a tradition of the oppressed” (Sahota, 2008: 201). It is this ambiguous and pre-conceptual

attribute of caste exclusion that makes it all the more difficult to oppose or resist it, for the locus of its existence is unfixed and fluctuating thereby rendering its power almost absolute. Yet, it is mainly through varied forms of embodied experiences, practices, and sensations that caste is made intelligible, and is continually brought into existence. For instance, Anupama Rao in her analysis on Dalit selfhood, writes of an incident in Dr. Ambedkar's life, in which, on a train-travel, he effected a repulsive reaction in the station-master once the latter became aware of his caste identity. While Rao goes on to argue that caste identity is not entirely "manifest upon the body" (Rao, 2006: n.p.), and includes a range of other exclusions in the public sphere, she does indicate how Ambedkar himself made a connection between facing the station-master's visceral revulsion and Frantz Fanon's famous description of being perceived as a Negro for the first time and being subsequently reduced to the colour of his skin. Thus, it may be argued that while the locus of caste is shifting, there is something deeply corporeal about caste identity and the oppression it entails. Moreover, it is only through the corporeal that caste can be registered, and subsequently resisted. As Bali Sahota explains, "Caste is baffling for having no manifestation in untouchable experience except in force. It has no separate existence from the feeling of 'little thorns' on the skin, or tears in the eyes" (Sahota, 2008: 201).

It may be argued that Namdeo Dhasal's poetry foregrounds the corporeal as a means to unpack the extreme dehumanising conditions of quotidian lived experiences of Dalits particularly in the urban context of Mumbai. While one may assume the dilution of caste identity under newer connotations of the term 'Dalit', and particularly in urban spaces, Dilip Chitre indicates traces of casteist exclusion in the locality of Central Mumbai, Dhor Chawl, that Dhasal came from. Chitre describes Dhor Chawl as "a 'neglected inner city slum'" (Chitre, 2011: 96), where "low caste Hindus, poor Muslims and assorted dalits lived as intimate neighbours... [in] a communal and caste *ghetto* in the big city" (emphasis added, 100). Thus, even though as a concept, Dalit, is made to go beyond strict bounds of caste to include the lumpenproletariat of the urban sphere, it does carry traces of casteist exploitation in a manner of marginalising and spatially restricting an entire subordinate section of society to "the rotten core of Mumbai" (99), where each individual is forced to exist as "the quintessential lumpen, the constantly degraded human being, and a weak and struggling member of a community of the deprived and dispossessed, with a scarred if not cracked identity" (98). The typical upper-caste middle-class horror that Chitre associates with these slum areas, red light districts, and the people who come from these spaces further reprises a revulsion akin to that which is conventionally displayed by the upper castes against

the untouchables. For instance, his reaction to meeting Dhasal for the first time gives away his own caste (and class) situatedness: “I looked at the young ruffian who stood in front of me. [...] He carried with him the ambiance of an unfamiliar world, a strata of society that was unknown to us but threatened our idea of life in some way” (103). Thus, one cannot entirely overlook the casteist foundation of social exclusions that continue to exist in urban spaces albeit in forms that may be somewhat hybrid or intersectional.

Dhasal’s poetry responds to hegemonic norms of social exclusion in urban spaces by foregrounding the corporeal, which is not only an integral component of his conception of the Dalit identity that is perpetually marginalised from the mainstream, but also a means to bring to surface the legitimised inscription of violence and exploitation on the very bodies of Dalits. Chitre further describes, in a characteristically material analogy, the contribution of having lived as a Dalit in a space of dispossession, to Dhasal’s political activism and poetry: “He grew out of a cesspool, drawing nourishment from it, metabolising its toxic waste and thriving on the immunity he acquired, to become the poet of the underworld...” (Chitre, 2011: 99). Thus, the corporeal is a strong component in Dhasal’s anti hegemonic Dalit resistance.

In his poetry, Dhasal envisions a surreal Dalit corporeality that is rife with sensations and spasms, “[taking] on an excessive and spasmodic appearance, exceeding the bounds of organic activity” (Deleuze, 2003: 45). Such a corporeality defies conventional norms of organisation and categorisation, which govern the lived experiences and ideological practices of a typical upper-caste middle-class reader. For instance, even as Dilip Chitre attempts to enter Dhasal’s world of the Dhor Chawl, he is rendered disturbed by a layout of space that, akin to Dhasal’s conception of a chaotic corporeality, affords no sense of organisation, neatness or privacy to its inhabitants: “rows of tenement rooms in Dhor Chawl are such that even horse stables and cowsheds may look luxurious in comparison” (Chitre, 2011: 95). In a typically Dalit framework of existence, thus, Dhasal foregrounds violence and exploitation by dismantling the supposed sanctity of an organised, unified, and a healthy body, and initiates a blur of boundaries between the categories of inside/ outside; solid/ fluid; and light/ dark in connection with human corporeality (and, in some cases, the dehumanising space that the Dalits are made to inhabit).

Dhasal’s poem, “Man, You Should Explode”, may be considered as an example. The poem establishes a world of excessive and unabashed disorder that begins by doing away with supposed bodily integrity and harmony: “Man, you should explode/ Yourself to bits to start with” (Dhasal, 2011: 9). The speaker suggests furthering this explosion by initiating an excess of intoxication, abuse, violence, rape, murder, vandalism, and destruction, all of which is conveyed through a corporeal excess:

*You should be ready to carve out anybody's innards without batting an eyelid
[...]*

Turn humans into slaves, whip their arses with a lash

Cook your beans on their bleeding backsides [...]

*Remove sticks from anybody's fence and go in there to shit and piss, and muck
it up*

Menstruate there, cough out phlegm, sneeze out goo [...]

*Man, you should drink human blood, eat spit roast human flesh, melt human fat
and drink it... (Dhasal, 2011: 9-10)*

Each of these spasmodic and guttural moments in the poem may be seen as a source of abject horror for the upper-caste middle-class reader, for the latter is transported “toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982: 2). The moments of sensory excess in the poem lead to a complete breakdown of those supposed boundaries that have helped the upper-caste middle-class retain their supposed moral superiority over and separation from the lowest stratum of society that has often been discursively legitimised as the “the threatening world” (13) and “imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (13), as it were. The poem may further be seen as a means to problematise the ideological conception of Dalit body as soiling, for it brings to surface the suggestion that all human bodies, without exception of caste or communal identity, are materially subject to ungovernable sensations such vomiting, menstruation, coughing, releasing excreta, which render them equally capable of effecting abjection or the fear of being subsumed by the ugly, the horrifying. Moreover, the suggestion in the poem to specifically, and violently break all barriers between the inside of the human body and outside, and further between solid and fluid, is telling, for it defies the hegemonic conception of human body in the Brahminical framework as a well-organised whole, and further as an analogy for propagating caste hierarchy³.

It may further be argued that very transformative and resistant potential of the poem is materially invested in its foregrounding of a corporeality that is rife with sensations, and is thus, nonorganic or in a state of perpetual becoming, for, as Deleuze explains, “the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life” (Deleuze, 2003: 45). It is the nonorganic quality of such a corporeality that makes it possible for the speaker in the poem to envision its eventual explosion which can lead to a plethora of transformative possibilities. As Deleuze suggests of the resistant impact of sensation on body, for, almost as a vibration, it takes the body to a state “‘before’ organic representation: axes and vectors, gradients, zones, cinematic movements, and dynamic tendencies, in relation to which forms are contingent or accessory” (45). Thus, in “Man, You Should Explode”, the body infested with sensations or

spasms of disorder, violence, and chaos is expected to eventually “grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up/ And burst at a nameless time to shrink...” (Dhasal, 2011: 10). The envisioned explosion, for the speaker in the poem, is an entry point into a supposedly non-ritualistic, universalist, utopian, non-chaotic, and inclusive world in which, “One should share each morsel of food with everyone else, one should compose a hymn/ To humanity itself...” (11). However, the non-corporeal abstract quality of the envisioned utopian world is particularly noticeable, for it unpacks the ambivalent and contradictory desire of the Dalit speaker to transcend a corporeality that is perpetually contaminated by violence, and exploitation. Bali Sahota explains this ambivalence in Dalit poetics that is centred on corporeality and embodiment: “What becomes most manifest is the struggle to relinquish the untouchable body for something more ethereal and less particularly marked” (Sahota, 2008: 200). Moreover, the non-corporeal attribute of the envisioned world further renders it representational in comparison to the world of disorder and chaos in the rest of the poem, for the former is conveyed through analogical and symbolic images of harmony and communal love: “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/ Man, one should act so bright as to make the sun and moon seem pale” (Dhasal, 2011: 11). These images stand in a stark contrast to the rest of the poem, which, through its material investment in bodily spasms and sensations to convey anarchy and chaos, may be seen as doing away with the representational and the analogical. Deleuze emphasises the materiality of sensation that is produced by the encounter between waves flowing through a nonorganic body (flesh and nerve) and other forces that act upon it at a given point of time: “When sensation is linked to the body in this way, it ceases to be representative and becomes real” (Deleuze, 2003: 45). By distancing the imagined utopian world of non-ritualistic inclusive practices from a material foundation, the poem tragically as well as realistically hints at its ephemeral and abstract quality.

In another of his poems, “Cruelty”, Dhasal uses the Brahminical ideology of perceiving the untouchables as less than humans or as animals contrapuntally to rearticulate animalism as a possible line of flight⁴ for the speaker’s broken and beaten self. The speaker begins by finding himself at the edge of humanity after having suffered and witnessed a lifetime of marginalisation of an entire community of Dalits: “The living spirit looking out of hundreds of thousands of sad, pitiful eyes/ Has shaken me/ I am broken by the revolt exploding inside me” (Dhasal, 2011: 64). As a reaction to his beaten down self, the speaker indicates a regression of his corporeality to an earlier, animal-like state, which permits him an abundance of cruelty, described as a venomous growth-spurt from his body: “A rabid fox is tearing

off my flesh with its teeth;/ and a terrible venom-like cruelty/ Spreads out from my monkey-bone” (64). This moment, in the poem, may be seen as a “zone of *indiscernibility* or *undecidability* between man and animal” (emphasis in original, Deleuze, 2003: 21), as described by Deleuze, which is created by a “tension between flesh and bone” (22). According to Deleuze, when there is a breakdown of the structural unity of flesh and bone in a human body, which is in a state of pain or suffering such that “flesh and bone confront each other locally rather than being composed structurally” (22), the body becomes meat; and further, as Deleuze explains, “[m]eat is not dead flesh; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colors of living flesh [...] every man who suffers is a piece of meat” (23).

Thus, in “Cruelty”, the torn down flesh of the speaker breaks down the structural unity of his body rendering ‘cruelty’ to spurt outward and away from his monkey-bone as a growth spurt, akin to a tail, or a fluid-like discharge. This confrontational moment between flesh and bone in the speaker’s tormented body may be seen as bringing it close to meat that, in its incessant suffering, is neither entirely human, nor entirely corpse, but is “the common zone of man and the beast, their zone of indiscernibility” (23). In the rest of the poem, the speaker attempts to locate varied lines of flight to transcend this state of becoming-animal, “Release me from my infernal identity” (Dhasal, 2011: 64). He attempts to connect rhizomically⁵ with conventional literary language and imagery to deterritorialise his brutal self and reterritorialise it in literary language and imagery: “Let me fall in love with these stars/ A flowering violet has begun to crawl towards horizons” (64). However, in the process, language itself gets deterritorialised by the speaker’s pain and injury to be further reterritorialised as the turbulent flow of revolting anger inside the speaker, as it were: “You, open your eyes: all these are old words/ The creek is getting filled with a rising tide; Breakers are touching the shoreline” (65). Towards the end of poem, however, the speaker is rendered in a similar state as in the beginning of the poem, for he continues to experience the outward flow of venom-like cruelty from his monkey-bone. However, this time, the venom is definitely fluid, and not flesh: “Yet, a venom-like cruelty spreads out from my monkey-bone. / It’s clear and limpid: like the waters of the Narmada River” (65). It may be argued that fluidity opens a new line of flight for the speaker’s suffering self, for it may be seen as rendering a paradoxically solid sense of clarity to his anger, malice, and the ensuing revolt within, a clarity uncontaminated by abstractions of civilisation, language, and imagery in the earlier part of the poem: “A poem is arousing a corpse from its grave/ The doors of the self are being swiftly slammed shut.” (64). Moreover, the provision of river-like fluidity as a possible avenue to reterritorialise the speaker’s tormented self is further significant, for lack of water

is an integral aspect of the Dalit lived experience: “*To be dalit is to be a human being denied free access to water...*” (emphasis in original, Chitre, 2011: 101). The poem may be seen as a slant attack on the quintessential irony in the upper-caste attempt to hold back a resource that by its very material virtue is wont to flowing, and thus cannot be controlled.

Gendering the Dalit Body (and Space)

This section intends to analyse the intersection of gender and caste in corporeal terms in Dhasal’s poems that bring to forefront the lived experiences of Dalit women.

It may be pertinent to consider the views of Dalit feminist critics, who have drawn attention to the limited and patriarchal frameworks provided to female subjects in Dalit poetry of the 1970s. Sharmila Rege notes, “The Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s - but in both their writings and their programme - the dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of the mother and the ‘victimised sexual being’” (Rege, 1998: 42). This may seem applicable to Dhasal’s poetry too, for those are indeed the subject positions made available to Dalit women in his poems. However, it may be interesting to explore the coordinates of the gendered or female corporeality that is foregrounded in these poems as a means to unpack the intersectional intricacies of a gendered Dalit resistance in Dhasal’s poems. Furthermore, the corporeal may be seen as a tool for locating the space of alterity inhabited by Dalit women, which deserves acknowledgement within the larger oeuvre of Dalit literature and resistance.

Dhasal’s “Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute: My Intended Collage” may be considered as an example. The poem focusses on the debilitating life of a sixteen-year-old sex-worker, Mandakini Patil. The speaker begins by foregrounding the sex-worker’s body in its most exploited and tormented state such that it transcends its human form, and is rendered almost meat or almost carcass.

*On a barren blue canvas
Her clothes ripped off, her thigh blasted open,
A sixteen-year-old-girl surrendering herself to pain.
And a pig; its snout full of blood* (Dhasal, 2011: 29).

The speaker continues to emphasise on the violated body of the sex-worker, which, when stripped of its forced external ornamentation and beautification, becomes a means for him to register the exploitative foundation of most affective relationships even within the supposedly moral upper-caste- middle-class context.

*The face that seems attractive is not really a face:
Behind it lies the bitter reality of a skull, the ordinary truth. [...]
In the backyard of love, all you find is fruits of fear and disgust. [...]
The beloved is only a sanctified form of a whore;
The lover is just a glorified pimp (29-30)*

By transporting the supposedly sanctimonious act of love from the bedroom to the backyard or the brothel, the sex-worker brings to surface the transactional foundation of any affective or marital relationship, for these relationships too are charged with a similar interplay of power and subordination. The power may be exercised on varied grounds of age, gender, or the differential placement of individual partners in relation to the mode of production; however, the mechanics of power and subordination work in such a way as to make it feasible only for one of the two partners in a relationship to be gratified at a given point, which, in most cases, may be the man. One may further connect this observation to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's analysis on caste that unpacks the intricate connection between women's sexuality and caste, for as Ambedkar suggests, the upper caste purity and morality, and, in fact, the very caste system, have solely been sustained through a range of ritualistic controls over women's bodies and sexuality, endogamy being one of such controls: "the absence of intermarriage - endogamy, to be concise - is the only one that can be called the essence of Caste..." (Ambedkar, 2009: 10). Thus, even in upper-caste middle-class context, the act of sexual intercourse, sanctified as 'lovmaking' or the 'rituals of the nuptial night', may be seen as exploitative at its core, for it is merely a means for the upper caste men to "regulate and control any transgression of boundaries" (Rege, 1998: 42) by the women.

Dhasal's "Mandakini Patil" further goes on to empower the sex-worker, for, she becomes a means for the speaker to deterritorialise his masculine self and connect with her on a common rhizome of caste exploitation centred on the female body in the form of physical labour, sex work, or caste-based violence:

*I feel your hair, your clothes, your nails your breasts
[...] they reveal to me within myself
colonies of the dead; hunchbacks left to die in the streets [...]
From that lacklustre look, you descend into me, and own me
You make anguish scream inside me; and stream inside me; and appropriate me
(Dhasal, 2011: 29-30).*

The suggestion of Mandakini Patil owning the body and psyche of the speaker is noteworthy, for it may be seen as a means to reverse the power dynamics between the subject and object, and to bring to surface the paradox of the speaker's

own unequal relationship with the sex-worker, for he too is a client capable of exploiting her on grounds of age, gender, affect, and physical prowess in the garb of commercial sex. For instance, the speaker does warn Mandakini Patil against the affective bonds and attachments that she may instinctively frame despite the commercial foundation of sex-work, for bodies bond, and such an affective connect, when placed in the dehumanising space of the brothel, would only add another layer to the dispossession of the sex-worker, unless she uses it strategically as a “salve to wounds” (31).

While “Mandakini Patil: A Young Prostitute: My Intended Collage” has the appearance of privileging the perspective the male speaker-client and thereby rendering the sex-worker silenced, one argues that by foregrounding the materiality of the sex-worker’s quotidian experiences in the dehumanising space of the brothel, and by bringing to surface the speaker’s own complicity in her exploitation, the poem may be considered adhering to the standards of a Dalit feminist standpoint, for “the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e. the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought)” (Rege, 1998: 45). Moreover, the speaker makes no attempt to appropriate the voice of the sex-worker; the poem, in fact, may be seen as an attempt to reconstruct and authenticate the significance of routine actions of the sex worker, towards survival or sustenance in spaces of exploitation, which become a means for the sex-worker and many other Dalit women to situate their encounter with or resistance against the intersection of different hegemonic power structures of caste, gender, age, sexuality, and affect.

Spaces of dispossession, especially in the urban context of Mumbai, are central to Dhasal’s poetry that focusses on the experiences of Dalit women, for these become a means to further interrogate dominant norms of femininity that are rendered problematised, fragmented, and challenged in a setting of extreme exploitation and violence. For instance, “Fountain Sprinkling Light” foregrounds a Dalit woman who finds herself unprotected in the corner of a street near a fountain - pregnant and drenched. The speaker is the unborn or about-to-be-born child of hers. The poem proposes a vehement denial of motherhood, which is achieved in corporeal terms in the poem by reversing the process of birthing. “Will I shatter inside myself? / Like glass? / Who is pushing me into a python’s belly?” (Dhasal, 2011: 22). The poem indicates the inability of the speaker to be born in a setting of oppression and violence as well as the inability of the woman to birth herself as a mother, in a position of protecting another life, when her own life is perpetually on the brink of death, as it were. The conventional process of birth for both the mother and child, thus, is reversed in the poem, for the child speaker’s life is

pulled inwards into death soon after being pushed out of the woman's womb even as she herself is rendered frozen, and estranged from the supposed mother who has birthed the child.

*I'm pulled in like a cold, senseless stiff
Into myself.
She is staring at me with wide-open eyes
As though she were someone else. [...]
My being thrilled is ending...
I am stunned from tip to toe (22).*

While the trope of motherhood is deeply connected with the idea of Indian nation and ethos, Dalit literature often brings to surface the gaps inherent in the dominant imagination of the mother, which lies in stark contrast to the lived experience of Dalit women in settings of extreme oppression and discrimination. In Dhasal's poems, too, there is a willed denial of mothering, often achieved in corporeal terms, as seen in the aforementioned example. In another of his poems, "Kamatipura", which derives its title from one of the marginalised slum-areas in Mumbai having the red-light quarter, such a denial of mothering is materialised in suggestions of deliberately and aggressively destroying or dismembering wombs of sex-workers that continue to nurture life that is unaware of the extremity of violence and death in the exploitative space of Kamathipura: "Let these poisoned everlasting wombs become disembodied/ Let not this numbed ball of flesh sprout limbs" (43). Dhasal's poems, thus, reject the proposition of reproduction and creation as seen in the upper-caste-middle-class paradigm of motherhood and parenting.

However, it is interesting to note that despite the interrogation of conventional motherhood, Dhasal's poems are interspersed with images of fertility or fecundity that may be situated elsewhere, in settings and spaces that are not traditionally maternal or within the familial paradigm. Fertility, thus, is deterritorialised from wombs and reterritorialised in spaces of dispossession that encapsulate quotidian lived experiences of the Dalit community in Mumbai. These spaces may be marginalised by the dominant authorities of the State; however, for the Dalit community these are the only spaces where they may feel homed, and may situate their counter-hegemonic moments of resistance. Dilip Chitre notes about the State's apathy towards the slum areas in Central Mumbai: "the slums of Central Mumbai survive like lesions, sores, festering wounds, or malignant tumours hidden in its superficially glamorous anatomy" (Chitre, 2011: 97). For Dhasal, however, these very marginalised quarters of Mumbai are generative - for here is where he situates his poetry, and here is where he sees possibilities for inventive transformations.

For instance, in “Kamatipura”, while normative motherhood is assertively denied, the speaker sublimates fertility into the routine activities of Kamathipura, consisting of street markets, sex-work, thievery, gang-violence etc.

*As the night gets ready for its bridegroom, wounds begin to blossom
Unending oceans of flowers roll out
Peacocks continually dance and mate. [...]
This is pain wearing a dancer’s anklets [...]
Here queue up they who want to taste
Poison’s sweet or salt flavour* (Dhasal, 2011: 43-44)

Dr. Ratoola Kundu and Shivani Satija in their study on Kamathipura, explain an entire culture of the ‘street’, consisting of markets selling fake products, brothels, ramshackle housing etc, which may be looked down upon but is permitted to exist due to the deliberately ambivalent approach of the dominant authorities towards such neighbourhoods in the city:

Overall Kamathipura as a space is seen as one which has accommodated these multiple fringe identities and occupations in the very heart of the city but through the complicity of the State. [...] This resulted in a proletarian casual economy and a public culture centred on the street, which encompassed ramshackle lodging houses, liquor shops, brothels, pawnshops, and sundry unregulated activities. (Kundu and Satija, 2016: 46).

In Dhasal’s “Kamatipura”, thus, images of fecundity are ephemerally interspersed in fragmented moments of a painful lifetime spent bit-by-bit in this red-light quarter of Mumbai. Kamathipura is conceived of in corporeal terms as a generative and regenerative entity, perhaps androgynous in its bodily comportment even as its corporeality is simultaneously articulated in terms of ornamentation as well as syphilitic sores, and, further as wearing dancer’s anklets and squatting in the mud.

While Dhasal’s Dalit poetry proposes a seemingly progressive gender ideology, it is imperative to consider the censure directed against him regarding his own abusive marriage with Malika Amar Shaikh. Shaikh, who belonged to a middle-class family of communist activists and went on to become a writer, speaks of the turmoil and pain that she endured while being married to Dhasal. In her autobiographical work, *I Want to Destroy Myself: A Memoir*, Shaikh mentions her marginalisation in her marriage, for she was always at the receiving end of emotional and physical abuse, Dhasal’s sexual liaisons with prostitutes, his disregard for domestic responsibilities, and an extremely condescending attitude towards her. Jerry Pinto, the translator of her autobiography, painfully observes:

There is a section [in the book] in which Malika Amar Shaikh, not yet twenty, finds herself with a baby in a rented room in Lonavla. She has no household help. Her only companion is a male chauvinist who, as an Ambedkarite has probably followed Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar into Buddhism, but cannot help quoting Hindu scripture at Malika. Her husband vanishes for days at a time, haring off to Pune and leaving her alone. [...] And then she discovers that her husband has infected her with a venereal disease. (Pinto, 2016: n.p.)

Thus, while the Dalit woman as a sex-worker or an oppressed mother has been foregrounded in Dhasal's poetry, his own wife was rendered subjugated and marginalised by him. Shaikh, in her autobiography, potently problematises and interrogates many contradictions in the seemingly revolutionary ideology of her poet-activist husband, who was ready to go to any lengths to help or support his relatives, friends and associates from Kamathipura, and his party colleagues, but was particularly indifferent or even hostile towards his own wife's basic requirements: "If there were no money for a political programme, our tape recorder, my ornaments, would all end up with the Marwadi [...] he owed everyone and I was caught in the trap of his indebtedness" (Shaikh, 2016: n.p.). She even speaks of the Dhasal's absolute lack of emotional empathy towards her, as a spouse, something that he was capable of displaying only to his party-workers and friends. In a poem of hers, "This Loneliness, Like That Of An Outcast" dedicated to Dhasal, she responds to him in similarly corporeal terms speaking of her disillusionment towards their relationship, her loneliness in grappling with both the desire for companionship and the requirements of running a home, and her sense of oppression on the very grounds of the affect that the speaker of "Mandakini Patil" warns the sex-worker against:

*Anytime in the morning or at noon or at night
Rises the sun of darkness
On the body. [...]
I walk on the lane
That inexorably leads to you. [...]
The fragile links are very often the strongest
As we know they can snap at time
We care for them even more
In any circumstance (Shaikh, 2017: n.p.).*

The ambivalence inherent in Dhasal's resistant vision, thus, makes it impossible for a simplistic or laudatory reading of his poetry, activism and politics. It further iterates the all-pervasive and capillary-like nature of power that is not restricted to a singular locus or structure. As Foucault explains about the deindividualized

and impersonal nature of power: “Power has its principle not so much in a person as ... in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault, 1995: 387-388). Thus, if power is rendered absolute in its all-pervasive functioning, an act of resistance too may be rendered fraught and fragmented even as it confronts a singular structure of power only to be incorporated by another. Bali Sahota, for instance, observes similar ambiguities and ambivalences that emerge within Dalit activism and politics from time-to-time: “Now low-caste parties ally themselves with reactionary governments, the old Panthers become the ardent voices of Fascist forces, and Harijan brothers and sisters institutionalize what looks like another version of caste discrimination wherever they come into power” (Sahota, 2008: 189). In a similar manner, the radical gender politics of Dhasal’s poetry too remain aporetic at best, for the supposed radicalism is always already confronted by the complexities of his own marriage, and the distressful narrative of his wife, Malika Amar Shaikh.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to undertake a corporeal analysis of selected poetry of Namdeo Dhasal by placing the concept of corporeality within a Dalit framework. The paper has attempted to chart the coordinates of intricate links between caste and embodiment to further analyse Dhasal’s response to these intricacies. This has entailed an examination of Dhasal’s interpretation of the term ‘Dalit’ as seen in his poetry and activism. The paper has further explored the gendering of the Dalit body and space in Dhasal’s poetry to examine selected poems in the light of observations of Dalit feminist critics, and to further locate possibilities for an intersectional analysis of caste and gender. An additional strand of analysis has delved into the spatial nuances of Dhasal’s poems, and the connection between body and space as seen in his poetry. It has finally been imperative to locate fissures in the gendered vision of Dhasal’s poetry by considering the contrapuntal narrative of his wife, Malika Amar Shaikh, so as to map and iterate the paradoxes inherent in any subaltern resistance directed against multiple structures of power.

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Notes

1. The term 'Dalit' is a political appellation derived from broken wheat, to signify the notion of a people who have been crushed and broken down. According to Anupama Rao, in "Representing Dalit Selfhood", the term was first used by Dr. Ambedkar in his newspaper, Bahishkrit Bharat, around 1928, and gained massive cultural visibility in Maharashtra during the 1970s. It may be suggested that the community of untouchables chose the term in rejection of all the traditional caste appellations, after their mass conversion to Buddhism initiated by Dr. Ambedkar. It is significant to note that the Dalit community seen in Dhasal's poetry seems to be inclusive of not just the untouchables but also of people of the lower class, the socio-economically backward population from rural areas, petty thieves, pimps, prostitutes, and the lumpenproletariat of the city.
2. Chitre, in "Namdeo's Mumbai", explains the meaning of 'number-two' or 'do number' as a slang commonly used in Mumbai implying activities of criminal origin such as black-market or illegal goods or wealth that is not accounted for. He further clarifies that for Dhasal, the word acquired an added layer of meaning implying 'second-class' or 'subordinate'.
3. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his work, *Who Were the Shudras? Volume 1*, explains the analogical use of the human body by the *Purush Sukta* from the Vedas, in which the supposed origin

of the four castes was underlined. The Brahmin's origin is connected to the mouth, the Kshatriya to the arms, the Vaishya to the thighs, and the Shudra to the feet. To this analogy, a divine injunction was added by *Manusmṛiti* stating that it was the creator, who created from different parts of his body, the different castes, for the well-being of the world.

4. The expression is used by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* to imply possible openings for movement, deterritorialisation and destratification that are present in all kinds of assemblage. These lines of flight are capable of creating or sustaining flux, movement, acceleration, rupture to render an assemblage unattributable or a 'multiplicity' that is perpetually in a state of becoming, as it were.

5. One borrows from Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the concept of the 'rhizome' in their work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, which breaks away from the conventional analysis of the hierarchical relationship of imitation or representation between two heterogeneous elements. Thus, signification is rendered irrelevant. Instead, one attempts to unpack the kind of relation one element establishes with other machines, assemblages, or bodies without organs, and what kind of intensities are transmitted in the process, and what multiplicities, or lines of flight generated. Literature, itself, according to them, is an assemblage.