

City and Body: A Study of Selected Poems of Namdeo Dhasal

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ABSTRACT

It is significant to study the notion of body as the notion has got changed from dualistic approach to the discussion of body through ontological approach in twentieth century (Larsson 2-3). Similarly, rejecting the binary between biology and culture, Grosz in her essay "Bodies- Cities" argues how "the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality (242). Furthermore, both these notions are very much part of modernism in the context of India as Supriya Chaudhri argues that the period from 1955 to 1975 is significant as the literature shifts from modernity to modernism marked by "new modernist oeuvre, densely allusive, rooted in the experiences of urban loneliness, the body, and sexuality" (Chaudhri 957). City emerges as an important phenomenon in the study of modernism as Gyanprakash argues, "Modernism was a uniquely metropolitan phenomenon" (Gyanprakash 3). Taking into consideration the above arguments, the present paper attempts to study the notion of body in the context of the Bombay city from 1955 to 1975. It attempts to study the selected poetry of Namdeo Dhasal. In the larger context, it attempts to study how the body gets constructed in the context of Bombay city in the poetry of Dhasal. Furthermore, it also attempts to study how this body is affected by caste markers.

Key words : body, Bombay, city, caste

The present paper attempts to study the notion of body in the context of Bombay city from 1950 to 1980. Analyzing the selected poems of Namdeo Dhasal, the paper discusses how the body gets constructed in the context of Bombay city. The selected poems are "Kamatipura", "Their Eternal Pity" and "On the Way to Dargah". Two of the poems are selected from Dhasal's collection entitled *Golpitha* published in 1972 and one is taken from his collection *Tuhi Yatta Kanchi* translated as What's Your Grade?

The paper uses the poststructuralist notion of body and especially focuses on Foucault and Butler's ideas on body as

Larsson states, "bodies are of central importance in the poststructuralist project" where the binary notion of the relationship between mind/subject and body/object was rejected (Larsson 5-7). The paper focuses the specific interpretation of Foucauldian notion of body as Johanna Oksala in her article entitled "Anarchic Bodies: Foucault and the Feminist Question of Experience" argues, "Foucault did not present a theory or even a unified account of the body anywhere, and thus his conception of it has to be discerned from his genealogical books and articles that aim to bring the body into the focus of history". She further argues that Foucault's

notion has been largely interpreted in three different ways and among them one which is approved by Butler and which Oksala herself considers as “strong reading” is “we can only understand as well as experience our bodies through culturally mediated representations, but bodies themselves are also shaped in their very materiality by the rhythms of culture, diets, habits and norms” (Oksala 105-6). Taking into consideration these arguments, the paper attempts to study the concept of body “as material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context” (Salih 74) in the selected poems of Dhasal.

Before discussing the notion of body within the poems, it is important to understand the general theme of the poems and its significance in the context of body and city. The title of one of the poems *Kamatipura* suggests the location of Kamatipura in Bombay which according to Susan Dewey is, “the biggest and the oldest area dedicated to prostitution in all of Asia” (Dewey 131). The poem divided into seven stanzas depicts the dark and hideous world of Kamatipura as the speaker says, “This is hell. This is an ugly agony” (Dhasal Kamatipura 74). Using the metaphor of porcupine, the poem unfolds the plight of prostitutes. The deceased bodies of prostitutes are like “potassium cyanide” baring the “pain of whoring” and waiting for “lotus to bloom” (74). The other poem *On the Way to Dargah* discusses how these “numbed

ball of fleshies” grow up on the shit and pass their entire life on the road. One more poem *Their Eternal Pity* marks the sharp contrast between the life of these people on road and that of the wealthy people as the speaker addresses them as “Lords of wealth, they are” (Dhasal Pity 98). All the three poems reveal the dark world of Bombay city, the world of Golpitha, the world of Faulkland road that is the “world of days of night, of empty stomach, of the pain of death, of overflowing gutters, of pimps, of naked knives, of opium” (Tendulkar 23). Vinay Dharvadkar in one of his article “Dalit Poetry in Marathi” argues that Dhasal’s poems represent the life of “urban untouchables usually living in street side slums, setting up house on the public sidewalks in a metropolis like Bombay” (Dharvadkar 319). In order to understand the theme of these poems, it is important to discuss rise of Dalit literature and contextualize Dalit panther movement within the political history of Bombay of 1950s to 1980s.

These almost three decades are significant in the history of Bombay city as Sujata Patel argues that it is a period “of redefinition of Bombay, both “politically and in imagination” (Patel 5). In the essay “Bombay and Mumbai: Identities, Politics and Popoulism” Patel discusses various socio political events occurred in Bombay after independence and how they brought major shifts in the city. One of the chief movements

that captured “city’s emotional space” (Patel 14) is growth of Dalit literature along with its political manifestation, Dalit panther movement started in 1972 (Patel 15). According to Anupama Rao, term Dalit refers to “A broken to pieces” and it was “first used by Ambedkar around 1928 in his newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*, the term gained new visibility in Maharashtra during the 1970s in the context of the literary and cultural efflorescence that saw the birth of Marathi Dalit sahitya” (Rao _). Discussing the significance of Dalit Literature, Dharwadkar argues, “the rejection of the past that flows through the heart of Dalit politics and identity also constitutes the Dalit literary and poetic bloodstream” (Dharwadkar 321). Dalit literature according to Hovell, “enter into a centuries-old history of both poverty and vitality” (Hovell 65). Especially, Bombay became major site of Dalit movement as it provided many reasons like “rapid pace of industrialization” and “diminishing availability of public utilities and resource” for their affliction (Gavaskar and Rodrigues 142). In this context Anupama Rao’s argument is significant as she says, “Dalit sahitya, the literature that emerged from this transformative period in Maharashtra’s politics in the 1970s, was deeply identified with the neighbourhoods and the working class ethos of Bombay” (Rao_). Some of the significant names associated with the movement are Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar,

Arun Kamble, Prahlad Chendwankar, Umakant Randeer, Daya Pawar, and Waman Nimbalkar (Zelliot 451).

According to Zelliot, Dhasal is “the political maverick and always creative poet. In the opinion of Chitre, Dhasal is the poet whose writing is “extremely sophisticated or avant-garde” (Chitre 93). Discussing Golpitha, Dhasal’s first poetry collection published in 1972, in the essay “The Architecture of Anger: On Namdeo Dhasal’s Golpitha” Dilip Chitre argues, “The anger of Golpitha rises to the level of architecture because it both systematizes disparate images from an authentic world hitherto invisible in literature, and uses the energy of anger to encompass a whole range of negative feelings and positive visions” (Chitre 94). Anupama Rao also argues that Golpitha is “the iconic text of insurrectionary speech, and the power of renaming and resignification” (Rao _). Commenting upon Dhasal’s connection with Golpitha Mane in her article “Recent Marathi Writing” writes “Golpitha is a lowly red light area of Bombay and Dhasal has seen its life from within” (Mane 99). In Dhasal’s *Golpitha* ‘leprous women are paid the price and fucked on the road, where children cry nearby, where prostitutes waiting for business sing full throated love songs” (Punalekar). Thus, it is possible to say that all three poems give “voice to voiceless”, “oppressed and downtrodden” such as prostitutes, pimps, beggars and all those

whose life is futile as the speaker in the poem *Their Eternal Pity* says, “ it is nausea to be human” (Dhasal 98).

These poems not only have similar theme but they also share a common city and the city which is centered around in these poems is Bombay. Especially, *Kamatipura* and *Their Eternal Pity* directly refer to the Bombay city as they discuss the area of Kamatipura and Faulkland Road located in the city. It is possible to analyze these poems with the help of Elizabeth Grosz’s essay “Cities-Bodies” where she provides “interface” relationship between body and city (Grosz 248). According to her, “the city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality” (Grosz 243). Moreover she argues, “cities help produce bodies and organize familial and other social relations, through domestic architecture, the arrangement of rooms, the divisions between public and private space (Grosz 241-253). It is possible to discuss these poems such as “Their Eternal Pity”, “On the Way to the Dargah” in the context of Grosz’s argument as the bodies of pimps, prostitutes, beggars and orphans are brought forth on roads and pavements as the speaker says, “In this life carried by a whore, not even sidewalks are ours” (Dhasal Pity 98). The place like Kamatipura produces the bodies suffering from “whoring” and the consequential diseases such as “syphilis” (Dhasal Kamatipura 74). In one of the poems

entitled “Their Eternal Pity” the speaker discusses how the architecture of the city such as “high pavilion” and “vaults shining with lights” produce “their body” which is wealthy and safely “locked up in their vaults” in contrast to “our body”, which is “beggarly”, “in crumpled rags” and located “on the shit in the street” or “on a pavement” (Dhasal Pity 55). The metaphor of our body refers to the bodies of pimp, prostitutes, beggars and downtrodden for whom survival is a challenge. For depicting their struggle for food, the speaker writes how they are unable to fill their “shriveled gut” “even with dirt” (Dhasal, *pity*, 98). In this context Grosz’s argument is significant as she argues cities “produce... inequalities of power between otherwise unrelated bodies” (Grosz 243). In *Dargah* poem also Dargah is the place where these two bodies intersect, one (their body) throws money and one (our body) accepts it.

Moreover, these poems break the elite version of sexuality enclosing within style, celebrity and beauty with circulation of the magazines like *Femina* (Gyanprakash 7) in Bombay by revealing the flip side of Bombay depicted in the poem *Kamatipura* where love gets transformed into “potassium cyanide” with deceased body and “poisoned wombs” of exploited prostitutes as the speaker says, “Taste this Potassium cyanide! As you die at the infinitesimal fraction of a second, Write down the small ‘s’ that’s being forever lowered” (Dhasal Kamatipura 75).

Using the metaphors of death and poison for these prostitutes suffering from syphilis and many other diseases, the speaker depicts the miserable condition of prostitutes. Sujata Patel in one of her essays discusses how on the one hand, the growth in trade and economy during late nineteenth and early twentieth century led Bombay towards modernity and on the other hand, this modernity was challenged by approximately ten million inhabitants facing crisis like poverty, slum dwelling, collective violence and urban crime (Patel xiiv, xiv).

Now taking into consideration Bombay city as the focal point in all the poems, it is possible to analyze the body-city relationship. Along with the common theme of city; these poems are also linked by their interest in body. The poem *Kamatipura* discusses the body of Bombay city which is antithetical to the "cosmopolitan" body of the city. Using the apostrophe in the last stanza, poem embodies *Kamatipura*. Depicting the body of *Kamatipura* which is "squatting in the mud" and suffering from the pain of assault, the speaker shatters the image of cosmopolitan body of Bombay city where the term cosmopolitan is used in the elite sense as it does not include slums, poverty and deprivation (Appadurai 32). The speaker describes *Kamatipura* as "pain wearing dancer's anklet, hell, ugly agony and as swirling vortex" (Dhasal 74). The metaphorical representation of prostitute as

porcupine can be interpreted as socially constructed body of prostitutes which resembles the body of porcupine. The body of prostitute is not attractive just as that of porcupine as Anupama Rao argues that in Dhasal's work the prostitute is constructed "as a symbol of detritus life, her body sucked dry and left to shrivel, and die" (Rao_). The poisonous quills of porcupine can be compared to poisonous body of the prostitute "wearing the syphilitic sores of centuries". The quills of porcupine get lodged into the skin and are difficult as well as painful to remove and sometime cause death. Similarly, the deceased bodies of prostitutes work like potassium cyanide which cause death as the poet says, "death gathers here". He compares prostitute's activity of love making with porcupine's attack as he narrates, "the porcupine wakes up at night and wounds you all over". The grey colour of porcupine can be interpreted as sign of gloomy and sadness in the life of prostitutes. This painful and deceased body of the prostitutes resembles the body of *Kamatipura* which is "squatting in the mud" of whoring. Both the bodies are trapped in this social structure which compel them to be in the love making business where deceased "women are paid the price and fucked on the road" to survive "in the desperate material circumstances" (Rao_) as the speaker says, "As you die at the infinitesimal fraction of a second, write down the small 's'..." This 's' can be interpreted as

daily sexual business which leads the prostitutes towards deathly deceases. Thus, the body of the prostitute emerges in all the three poems is the body without any significance. Their only identity is of the prostitute or whore situated on road or footpath trapped in love making business with their deceased bodies. In one of the poem *Pity* the speaker shows disgust for this life by saying "this life... so beggarly it is nausea to be human" (Dhasal, *Pity*, 98). The only way to escape from this structure is death as in the poem "Dargah" the speaker makes clear that she "went...in heaven" as "she was tired of the harassing ghosts in the street" and "wanted to wash off the darkness in her sari" (Dhasal, *Dargah*, 55). Darkness in her sari is the metaphor for the orphan child who is the speaker of the poem. In this context, Rao provides significant link between prostitute's body and city as she says, "the prostitute appears more generally as a symptom of Dalit urbanity" (Rao_). Chitre also argue that Dhasal's poetry "invoke the exploitation, degradation and alienation of woman as the central tragedy of human civilization (Chitre 94).

As discussed earlier, all the three poems depict the bodies of prostitute, pimp and beggars. The images such as "wearing the syphilitic sore", "an iron eye and tear in it", "swirling vortex", "shed the skin" portray the picture of a scatter body of porcupine/prostitute. In *Pity* and *Dargah*

poem also a fragmented images are captured such as "lords of wealth", "lock up", "day supports them", "born on pavement" and "crumpled rags". These images provide the picture of fragmentary bodies which don't fit into the bourgeois notion of complete body. These bodies which don't even exist as complete bodies, as speaker says they are, "numbed ball of flesh" (Dhasal *Kamatipura* 74). Here it is possible to argue that caste as a theoretical aspect also creates margin where these fragmented bodies exist. The poems fail to represent them as complete as they have "become disembodied". Using disembodiment or non existence as strategy, the poems problematise the notion of Bombay city as complete body as they are the extract or the margin of city living in "shit on street" or in "ugly agony" like *Kamatipura* and *Faulkland road*.

Thus, the paper studied the notion of body in the context of Bombay city in Namdeo Dhasal's selected poems. It mainly discussed the relationship between the bodies of prostitutes, pimps, beggars, children on footpath and slum dwellers and areas such as *Kamatipura* and *Faulkland road*.

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The greatest barrier to success is the fear of failure.

– Sven Goran Eriksson