



KESHAV MESHAM'S POETRY: THE EXCAVATION OF MAINSTREAM LITERATURE

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Abstract:

The huge structure of dalit poetry is settled on four pillars, each comprising a vital element in dalit literature. Dr. Ambedkar offered it the spirit of struggle; Lord Buddha added patience, Jyotiba Phule provided protest and the last but not least is the exploitation and oppression by the upper classes. Derrida's theory of Deconstruction is also applicable to dalit poetry as it is a process where the dalit is brought to the centre from the periphery where they remained not because of their wish but because of the caste system which never allowed them to enter the mainstream. Dalit poetry believes in the adaption of Dalit identity and rejection of the upper-class culture, tradition, norms, language and symbolism. Dalit poetry practices and uplifts the language, idiom, metaphor and imagery of the dalit life. Keshav Meshram is a very influential dalit poet, the one who could get stuck in the mainstream Marathi poetry with his poetic genius and creativity. The life of dalits full of miseries, exploitation, suffering oppression and illiteracy is the theme of his poetry. The subjects of the mainstream Marathi poetry were gods, nature, love, conventional moral. They found pleasure in glorifying inanimate objects, but the beauty and art of these poets failed to portray the life of a class of society that was denied basic rights and was subjugated for centuries.

Keywords: Dalit, Marathi, Darwaje, Ambedkarite, Utkhanan, etc.

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Keshav Meshram is a very influential dalit poet, the one who could get stuck in the mainstream Marathi poetry with his poetic genius and creativity. The life of dalits full of miseries, exploitation, suffering oppression and illiteracy is the theme of his poetry. The subjects of the mainstream Marathi poetry were gods, nature, love, conventional moral. They found pleasure in glorifying inanimate objects, but the beauty and art of these poets failed to portray the life of a class of society that was denied basic rights and was subjugated for centuries.

Meshram focuses the life of dalits, untouchables, the downtrodden, the deprived and the marginalized people. The first decade of dalit poetry was dominated by the poetry of Meshram. Meshram succeeded in focusing over the neglected social consciousness. The imagery in his poetry is of par excellence. The fine fusion of living and non- living objects helps the spontaneity of the

emotional flow. These images help to depict the sorrows and the pains of Dalit life in an apt manner. The dalits got a representative who could voice their pains and suffering in a sound manner and destroyed the traditional values of the poetry in vogue. By constructing new modes of literary form, he got the recognition as a major poet.. His practice led to the vast growth and development of dalit poetry in particular and dalit literature in general. Thus new born dalit poetics inspired by the philosophy of Ambedkar flourished in a very short period of time.

Meshram realized the falsehood, artificiality and traditionalism in the mainstream poetry. He started writing poems with social awareness and commitment and dalit consciousness. He discovered a new rhythm and gave identity to the dalit verses. He totally transformed and revolutionalized the traditional Marathi poetry. Meshram rejected imitation, his poetry marked the stamp of originality .With his artistic style, merit and beauty, he established a new form that remained distinct from the traditional one. One observes that dalit poetry abandoned old traditions, symbols, myths and imaginary subjects. In a way it transformed the very nature of mainstream Marathi poetry by giving it new modes of experience and expression.

Meshram is considered to be the first mouthpiece of dalit community to represent their anger, agony, and suffering through poems. His poetry reveals the social sorrow rather than individual sufferings. The social is always valued more than the individuals. It is the very nature of dalit poetry that it adores humanity where society prevails over man.

In the poem “Closed Doors” (Band Darawaje), the poet Meshram considers his society as a caged bird. The bird without freedom, the bird has been caged for centuries. Meshram presents the sensitivity of this bird, the anger of this helpless creature, whose wings are chopped off by the upper castes. Meshram provides the bird, the power to break the cage and take long flight in the vast span of the sky. Though the bird has been caged for centuries, it possesses a lot of strength, a lot of power. So, it can fly swiftly and soar high up in the firmament. Meshram believes in the power of society, particularly the youth. The young generation of the society is full of power- the power to transform the very picture of the society. This angry young dalit youth can demolish and destroy the regime of the contractors of the tradition and their so- called ideology. This young brigade is ready to wage a war against the brutal force used by the upper classes. Meshram says that now the time has come, the time of transformation, the age of revolution. He asks his fellowmen to tell him what he can do for them. Meshram wants his fellow human beings to live a proud and honourable life, a life of love and freedom.

Meshram has himself experienced hunger, poverty, untouchability, and exploitation. He knows the pains of such miserable life. He urges his community to wake up and oppose the oppressors. He thinks that the culture and the tradition operated by the high classes have taught them to bend low as they belonged to the lower castes. These people exploited the lower classes to achieve their desired goals. These upper classes constructed huge buildings, beautiful bungalows, large gardens and also good crematoriums for themselves. All this, they achieved, by harassing and exploiting the poor. They have established their lives but there is nothing worthwhile for the poet or for his fellow beings. Thus, the poet urges upon his community to unite, soar high in the sky. He wants them to be broad-minded enough and allow him to have a space for himself.

*Stuck my feathers to the arrow to hurl it
Taught me to ruches...Bowling, saluting subhashite
.....
Cluck noisily when anyone on banyan directly is alighting
All water holes, specific sitting places, cremation grounds, public universities,
Specific sitting paces for so called scholars,
For them....
..... what then for us
From your sky a probable sandy patch
Will you keep for me? Soar up birds in silence (Meshram, BD, 46).*

The poem ‘In Our Colony’ depicts the real picture of the real colonies. The poet here portrays the picture of Dalit life surrounded by various problems and miseries. The location of dalits is always at the far end of the town or the village. They are always put to live on the periphery, a part of the

village detached from the main locality, a part of the village where poverty rules the lives of the dalits. Such an area is called Maharwada or Mangwada. The picture of this slum is totally in contrast with that of the main locality. There is rarely a well-constructed house where one can see cleanliness rarely observed. Everywhere there are naked children playing and quarrelling. The extreme poverty, hunger and illiteracy have captured their lives. Just like the lives of dalits, their colonies are also deprived of basic facilities such as food, clothes and roof. If one enters the colony, one gets confused, for all the huts look the same. It becomes difficult to find the exact address. The poet very well describes,

*In our colony
The postman gets bamboozled
Teaching gets confused
Civilization stumbles
The sun- even he is darkened
Our houses stand
Like footprints of cattle in the mud.
In the midst of it all is a soul
Eager to swim along the current (Meshram, IOC, 09).*

The locality is surrounded by the darkness of ignorance, exploitation by the upper classes and victimization by tradition and culture. The community has been living in such pathetic, pitiable conditions for thousands of years.

The experience of acute hunger is very common for dalits. It is the part of their life. For most of the time they remain half fed. They work day and night, in sun and in rain but still they remain poor and hungry. The poet very aptly remarks,

*The people of this place
Carrying the loads of soft cotton on their shoulders,
Their hands rough but weak,
the bangles jingling with the crooked sky.
The kids perspiring all over in the sweltering heat.
Some working on the open trucks
Their veins swollen- eyes half closed (Meshram, IOC, 09).*

Poverty and helplessness are the result of oppression. The society is thrice subjugated by Dalithood, poverty and illiteracy. The poet very sensibly represents the life of dalits affected by caste discrimination. According to the poet there is no matter for discrimination between the dalits and the upper classes other than the birth. The people of this community are exploited and discriminated only because they are born as dalits. This tradition and culture has left them to suffer and live in inhuman conditions. The poet depicts,

*Our colony drown in the pegs of 'country wine'
Subsisting on the hot chillied pieces of meat-floating in the
spicy, hot gravy
Leaving half fed despite working full hours
Yet surveying closely in the mellow light of
The candle the future of each coming new day
Our colony gets stirred hearing the footsteps of the postman
(Meshram, IOC, 09).*

There is nothing new, nothing changed, and the life is the same every day. The sun shines and the moon shines but even though the lives of these thousands of people remain enveloped in darkness. They struggle very hard to survive, to get some food, to fulfil their hunger. There is no aim rather than filling the empty stomachs.

Meshram, being a sensitive poet is confused about many socio-economic inequalities. He does not understand the difference between the dalit/untouchable people and the upper caste people. They look the same mind, their origin is also the same, and then what kind of difference it is and why it is so

are the questions that vex Meshram's mind. He marks the differences in the lifestyle and living of his society and the upper classes. His poems depict the horrible reality of dalit life. It also presents the terrible inequality and so abuses god for this hellish life. He asks many questions. They come out as an outburst of suppressed feelings.

*Salya, for a piece of bhakari
Will you break a cartful of wood?
For your father's petty expenses...
Will you cook the bones of siblings?
And you will not do this
For this you have to toil being insulted in the soil
And yet love your own nestlings, (Meshram, ODCMFG, 47).*

The whole community is broken by the burden of social restrictions, norms and values. The poet proves them all as false and curses god for such a life. Not only the body but the soul and the mind of his people are wounded. He asks them for how long are they going to carry this burden and for how long do they suffer? He has strong faith in the teachings and principles of Ambedkar. He believes in Ambedkarite philosophy and ideology. For him Ambedkar is the real "sun" that dispels the darkness in their lives. He taught them to live the life of self- respect and dignity. Due to his message the dalits have thrown off the yoke of slavery and untouchability that they were carrying for centuries. For Meshram Ambedkar is like a lighthouse directing the lives of thousands of dalits by breaking the shackles of class, caste, culture and religion. He offered them the freedom to live, to breathe the free air, to know true meaning of life. It is with the call of Ambedkar these people are overcoming the barriers and vowed to forge ahead. The poem 'Excavation' (Utkhanan) describes the role of Ambedkar in establishing a new era for dalits. By excavating the history of tradition and culture, Ambedkar discovered a new face for humanity. The poet presents:

*People walk resting their backs to the mountains
Their forehead will be full of vermillion.
.....
The torches in their hands burn like a child
closed to the mountain
torches move, swabs dash, the eyes of those
who witness it will burst (Meshram, EX..)*

The poet uses poetry as a sword to fight a war against the authorities, the men of the establishment who have exploited the lower classes.

The reality of dalit life, their culture, their familial conditions, social status and economical position are all focused by Meshram. He describes, when you enter the dalit locality you can see the black bodies like the skeleton covered cruelly with dark skin. You could see the groups of hungry dalit boys constantly searching for food. The most dreadful is the picture of dalit women, triply exploited by the society by way of class, caste and gender.

Meshram has painted the dreadful reality of dalit life on a vast canvas. The dalit locality is full of possibilities. Their life is different. Some of the dalits work day and night while others waste their time in drinking and gossiping. The life is thus entrapped by addiction and ignorance. When the postman enters such area at first instance, he gets baffled if he does not know the exact address. The poet has projected an ironic picture of the situation in exact words.

*The postman
He is simply harassed
In deciphering the name and address
Scribbled out illegibly in purple
Got by dipping the tip of the copying pencil in saliva
The postman frustrated in searching Ranu Narayan
Surrounded by naked guides
Groaning in agony as though hit on the knee*

*He keeps on wandering mutely in search of Ranu Narayan
Bending and moving through mud and marsh
Sweating in the clumsy livery.
The search is over.
'Ranu granny is expired'
The colony grappled with the message
Like an eagle pouncing upon its pray (Meshram, IOC, 09).*

Meshram describes the society where birth and death are everyday episodes. They do not mourn on death as they die every day, as they live in the midst of death. They experience death at every moment, in this society. The poet says that the people are so ignorant of knowledge that they do not value education. But they need to understand the worth of education and knowledge. The poet focuses on the message of Dr. Ambedkar, “*Educate, unite and agitate*”. Meshram points out the positive impact of Ambedkar on the minds of dalits. He mentions the change as,

*In our colony reforms get confused
Paths are bruised, schemes stumble
Now only now have boys started learning.
They write poems – stories- Indian literature
The axes of words fall upon the trees of tradition
The warm experienced hailstones
Of strange realities rain
On the dreams of literature (Meshram, IOC, 09).*

The poet remarks the literary awareness which gave birth to the new era of literature- the era of dalit literature. This literary awareness resulted in the transformation of the lives of thousands of dalits. This awareness gave rise to various movements for the liberation of these downtrodden and underprivileged communities. It is because of Ambedkar only that the dalits got united and a kind of socio- cultural and the political awareness peeped in the life of the dalit community.

The educated class of dalit community started to unite and write. They expressed their pains and sufferings in their writings. This realistic depiction of social conditions shakes the very foundation of traditional literary forms. Dalit literature has not yet been acknowledged as literature in its own right, and no reference to it is found in the standard literary journals of India. But the reverberations of it are heard all around the globe. The poems of Meshram ask for their right for representation. The subjects of dalit poetry are different from the mainstream Marathi literature. In the world of dalits, women are casually stripped and molested, men brutally murdered and this has been going on for centuries, generations after generations. These are the untouchables who invite death if they dare to quench their thirst from common pond. There is discrimination among the gods also. Their gods are different than those of the Brahmins or the upper caste. This god does not accept their supplication. He is not capable of feeling their pains and miseries. At the same time, he is kind to the one and fierce to the other i.e., the dalit. Meshram challenges such a god that practises partiality. In “One day I Cursed that Mother Fucker God” Meshram expresses the agony of his mind:

*Would you wipe the sweat from your bony body
With your mother's ragged sari?
Would you work as a pimp
To keep her in booze?
O, father, oh, god the father !
You could never do such things.
First you'd need a mother...
One no one honours,
One who toils in dirt
One who gives and gives of her love (Meshram, ODCMFG, 47).*

God will not do it, the poet knows it for certain, but a mother, so toiling and loving will, do it by force. It is with these words, at once ironic and compassionate, that the poem ends. The ending of a Dalit poem is often found remarkable in that it gives a kind of jerk that corrects the reader's

sensibility, in an unusual manner, restoring it a balance. The defamiliarization is a poetic process through which a Dalit poem passes and transforms itself into something new and miraculous.

Thus we may conclude that Meshram's poetry is unique in the sense that it builds its structural pattern out of Dalit sensibility. It is unusual, exceptional in terms of experience and expression—something alien to the so called Marathi middle-class sensibility. It transfers the themes of isolation, alienation, protest, revolt, struggle for survival, freedom from all sorts of bondage and exploitation, apathy, estrangement and uprootedness, a search for new identity and a longing for human dignity. It is thus poetry of protest, voicing its opposition to all that is orthodox, traditional and conventional. It is as much empathetic as evocative and addresses itself a new to its reader in terms of startling images and symbols, differently molded myths and metaphors.

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