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The Wound and the Lyric: A Study of Four Dalit Poets

Mr. Atul Santosh Jadhav (Assistant Professor)
(SNBP College of Arts, Commerce, Science and Management Studies, Pune-18)

Abstract
This paper looks closely at the poetry of four major Dalit writers—Namdeo Dhasal, Hira Bansode, Meena Kandasamy, and Sukirtharani—to understand how they turn the pain of caste-based oppression into something that is not just personal but political, not just raw but artful. The argument here is that their work does more than simply describe suffering. It functions as what might be called "lyrical testimony"—a way of bearing witness that pushes back against the stories that caste society tells about itself. Through a careful reading of their poems, the paper traces the themes that run through their work: the body as a site of violence and resistance, the struggle for space and dignity, the rewriting of religious and social symbols, and the use of anger as something that is both aesthetically valid and politically necessary. What becomes clear is that while these poets share a common ground in their resistance to caste, their approaches are shaped by where and when they write, what language they choose, and how they understand gender. Dhasal writes from the gut, giving voice to the chaos of urban poverty. Bansode captures the particular grief of a Dalit woman caught between caste and patriarchy. Kandasamy meets centuries of hierarchy with a sharp, English-language wit. Sukirtharani insists, in Tamil, that a Dalit woman's desire belongs to her. The paper closes by suggesting that these poets are doing something more than adding new voices to Indian literature. They are rethinking what literature is for—showing that for those who have been pushed to the edges, writing can be an act of liberation.

Keywords: Dalit Poetry, Namdeo Dhasal, Hira Bansode, Meena Kandasamy, Sukirtharani, Caste Oppression, Resistance Literature, Lyrical Testimony, Dalit Feminism

Introduction

For a very long time, the literary traditions that India took pride in were shaped mostly by upper-caste perspectives. This meant that the lives of Dalit communities—the people at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy—rarely found a place in what was considered serious literature. This was not simply a matter of oversight. It was an active kind of erasure, a way of pretending that the brutal realities of caste were either too trivial to matter or somehow natural and unchangeable. All of that began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, when a new kind of writing emerged, most forcefully with the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra. This was literature that refused to be polite. It insisted that if literature was going to mean anything, it had to speak from the place where the wound was deepest. Poetry, with its ability to pack emotion into tight spaces and to bend language until it breaks, became one of the most powerful forms this new voice took.

This paper brings together four poets who have been central to that tradition: Namdeo Dhasal, Hira Bansode, Meena Kandasamy, and Sukirtharani. They are all Dalit. They all write against caste. But beyond that, their work could not be more different. Dhasal, who helped start the Dalit Panthers, writes with a kind of raw, masculine energy that seems to come straight out of the streets and slums of Mumbai. Bansode, writing around the same time, speaks to something different: the experience of a Dalit woman, who finds herself crushed not just by caste but by a patriarchy that cuts across caste lines. Meena Kandasamy, a generation younger, writes in English and brings to her poetry a fierce, almost academic kind of rage—she is dismantling arguments as much as she is writing lines. Sukirtharani, working in Tamil, has made it her project to write openly about the Dalit woman's body, about desire, about sexuality, in a way that challenges both upper-caste notions of purity and patriarchal ideas about what women should say.

What ties these four together, despite all their differences, is something this paper calls "lyrical testimony." The term comes from recent work in trauma studies, and it is useful because it helps us see that these poets are doing more than just documenting what happened to them or to their communities. They are bearing witness in a way that connects the personal to the collective, the past to the present. They are turning pain into a kind of knowledge, and then turning that knowledge into art that pushes back against the stories that have been told about them. The argument here is that this kind of poetry is not just a mirror held up to society—it is a hammer, and it is trying to break something.

Theoretical Framework: Rethinking What Counts as Aesthetic

If you try to read Dalit poetry using the standards of traditional literary criticism, you are likely to miss the point. This is something that Dalit critics like Sharankumar Limbale have been saying for decades. The problem is that most literary theory, especially the kind that comes from the West, assumes that art and politics can be separated—that a poem should be judged on its formal qualities, its beauty, its complexity, and not on what it is trying to say about the world. For Dalit writers, this separation makes no sense. Their literature is not about "art for art's sake." It is about what they call satyashodhan (the search for truth) and bandhkam (rebellion). The aesthetic value of a Dalit poem lies in how well it manages to capture the truth of oppression and how fiercely it refuses that oppression.

Recent scholarship has tried to develop frameworks that can handle this kind of writing without reducing it to sociology or political pamphlet. One useful concept is "traumatic materialism." The idea here is that Dalit poetry is not just social documentary. It uses the raw materials of poverty and violence—a broken sandal, a bleeding foot, the smell of a gutter—not just to describe a scene but to become that scene, to make the reader feel it in the body. This is an aesthetic that works through the gritty details of life, turning them into something that has both political weight and artistic force.

Another useful framework comes from trauma studies, though here too the usual models need some adjusting. A lot of trauma theory, especially in its Eurocentric forms, has focused on the idea that trauma is unspeakable—that the experience is so overwhelming it cannot be put into words. For Dalit poets, and especially for Dalit women poets, this idea can be a trap. It can suggest that silence is the only response. What scholars have proposed instead is the idea of "lyrical testimony"—a form of writing that insists trauma can and must be spoken, that connects the individual experience to a collective history, and that creates a chain of remembrance that stretches across generations. This is what Dalit poets do. They give voice to what has been silenced, and in doing so, they build an archive that challenges the official records. This paper will use these two ideas—traumatic materialism and lyrical testimony—to look at how the four poets in this study make language strong enough to carry what they need it to carry.

The Body as a Battleground

The body has always been at the center of caste. The whole system rests on rules about who can touch whom, who can eat with whom, whose shadow is considered polluting. For centuries, the Dalit body was regulated, controlled, marked. It makes sense, then, that Dalit poets would make the body central to their work. But they do so in very different ways.

Namdeo Dhasal: The Body in the Gutter

Reading Namdeo Dhasal's Golpitha is not an easy experience. He takes you into the red-light districts of Mumbai, into a world of prostitutes and pimps, of addicts and laborers, and he does not clean anything up for you. The language is rough, full of street slang and obscenity. It is a deliberate assault on the kind of polished, respectable Marathi that was considered literary before him. In poems like "Cruelty," he does not ask for your sympathy. He shows you the body as it really is: hungry, diseased, wounded, but also alive in a way that refuses to disappear.

What is striking about Dhasal is that his body is not just a victim. It is also a source of knowledge—a kind of knowledge that you can only get by living at the bottom. And it is a source of power, even if that power is what the respectable world would call perverse. When he

writes about "dirt," he is doing something complicated. He is not just describing the filth that caste society associates with Dalits. He is taking that word, "dirt," and turning it around, making it a badge of honor rather than a mark of shame. His poetry performs what the theorists call traumatic materialism: it uses the language of abjection to refuse abjection. The body in Dhasal is wounded, yes, but it is also a weapon. As one scholar has noted, there is a kinship here with the Black Arts movement in America—the same grounding of politics in the felt reality of the flesh.

Sukirtharani: Reclaiming Desire

If Dhasal gives us the body of the urban male laborer, Sukirtharani gives us something that has been even more carefully controlled: the body of the Tamil Dalit woman. Her poetry makes a radical move by refusing the terms that have been used to police that body. In poems like "The Call of the Cuckoo," she writes openly about female desire. This might not sound radical, but in the context of Tamil society, where Dalit women have been either hypersexualized or desexualized depending on what serves the interests of upper-caste patriarchy, it is a powerful act.

Sukirtharani's poetry insists that a Dalit woman's body belongs to her. It is not the property of her community, not a vessel for upper-caste male fantasy. It is a site of pleasure and will and self-definition. This is lyrical testimony of a particular kind: by writing desire, she is not just speaking out against violence, though that is part of it. She is claiming a fundamental right—the right to be a subject of one's own desire, not just an object of someone else's. In a culture that has historically denied Dalit women even this basic form of humanity, the act of writing desire becomes a form of liberation.

Hira Bansode: The Mother's Body as Archive

Hira Bansode's poetry has a different tone. Where Dhasal is explosive and Sukirtharani is defiant, Bansode is elegiac. In her famous poem "My Mother," she writes about her mother's body—the bent back, the calloused hands, the body worn down by years of hard labor. This is not just any labor. It is labor that was extracted from her because she was a Dalit woman, because her body was considered available for exploitation in ways that upper-caste women's bodies were not.

What Bansode does in this poem is turn her mother's body into a text. She reads it. She asks us to read it. And in doing so, she creates what the theorists call a "narrative chain of remembrance." Her mother's suffering, which might otherwise have been forgotten, is now recorded. It becomes part of a collective memory. Unlike Sukirtharani, who writes desire, Bansode writes grief. But it is grief that carries anger within it—anger at the systems that wore her mother down, anger at a society that made that labor invisible. Her poetry insists that this worn, stigmatized body be seen, be remembered, be honored. That is its own kind of reclamation.

Meena Kandasamy: Writing the Politics of Touch

Meena Kandasamy brings a different set of tools to the theme of the body. She writes in English, which gives her work a global reach but also places her in a complicated position. English is the language of the colonizer. It is also, in modern India, the language of education and social mobility. Kandasamy uses it with a sharp, almost surgical precision. In poems like "Touch," she takes on the fundamental taboo of caste: physical contact between Dalits and upper castes. She dissects the anxiety that surrounds this contact, showing how it reveals the deep-seated fears of purity and pollution that continue to structure Indian society.

For Kandasamy, the body is not just a physical entity. It is a site of discursive struggle. Her poetry works to "rewrite the body"—to strip it of the vocabulary of untouchability and give it a new language of anger and entitlement. She is acutely aware of the power of naming, and she uses that power against the systems that have named her. Her body is textual, political, a battleground where she asserts her right to define herself.

Reclaiming Space

If the body is one battleground, space is another. Caste determines not just who you can touch but where you can go—which wells you can drink

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from, which temples you can enter, which streets you can walk on. The poets in this study all engage with the question of space, but they do so from different locations.

Dhasal's Golpitha: Finding Power in the Margins

For Namdeo Dhasal, the golpitha—the red-light district—is not just a setting. It is a condition of being. He does not write from the perspective of a Dalit who wants to be accepted into respectable society. He writes from the spaces of the absolute outcast. His poetry finds a kind of power there, in the gutter, in the slum. This is a radical choice. He is not asking for permission to enter the temple. He is turning the gutter into a site of profound art, insisting that the margins are not just places of deprivation but sources of a counter-knowledge that the center cannot access.

Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy: The Politics of the Sandal

The Kannada poet Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, who is not one of the four main poets in this study but offers a useful point of comparison, captures this spatial politics in a single image: the sandal. In his poem "Sandals and I," he writes about the old prohibition that prevented Dalits from wearing sandals in the presence of upper castes. The sandal, a simple object, becomes a symbol of subordination. But Chinnaswamy turns it around: "When I go to the temple / I don't leave my / sandals outside, / I stay outside myself." By refusing to remove his sandals, he refuses the terms of his own exclusion. The temple, which should be a space of inclusion, is revealed as a site of exclusion. His choice is not to beg for entry but to reject the legitimacy of the space that excludes him. This is a strategy we see echoed in the work of other Dalit poets who refuse the desire for inclusion and instead assert the value of their own spaces.

The Poetics of Anger

Anger runs through all of Dalit poetry. But it is important to understand what this anger is and what it is not. It is not a loss of control. It is a deliberate, strategic choice. It is a refusal to be grateful, to be patient, to forgive—the very emotions that caste society expects from those it oppresses.

Dhasal's Foundational Rage

Namdeo Dhasal is the source of this aesthetic of rage in modern Dalit literature. His work with the Dalit Panthers made anger into a legitimate political response. His poems do not ask for sympathy. They demand accountability. The language of rage in Dhasal is not, as one critic puts it, an "incoherent jumble of words." It is a controlled explosion, aimed at shattering the reader's complacency. This rage makes the invisible visible. It drags the violence of caste out of the shadows and onto the page. And it creates solidarity among those who share it.

Bansode's Subversive Elegy

Hira Bansode's anger is quieter but no less real. It is the slow burn of a woman who watches her mother's life consumed by the twin forces of caste and gender. She channels this anger into elegy and irony. She refuses to let the suffering be forgotten. By recording it meticulously, she turns private grief into public indictment. In "Stolen," she directs her anger at the systems that appropriate Dalit women's bodies and labor, using the poem as a space to articulate a pain that has been deliberately overlooked.

Kandasamy's Intellectual Incendiary

Meena Kandasamy's anger is sharp and witty. She uses irony and satire to dismantle the hypocrisies of the caste system and the mainstream literary world that often wants to aestheticize or ignore it. Her rage is a performance, a provocation. In poems that address figures like the Indian poet Subramania Bharati, she interrogates the limits of a progressive politics that fails to address caste. Her anger is not just about what has been done to her. It is about the lies told to justify it. It is the rage of a scholar who has read the texts that justify her oppression and wields her own text as a weapon of counter-argument.

Conclusion

What emerges from the work of Namdeo Dhasal, Hira Bansode, Meena Kandasamy, and Sukirtharani is a simple truth: the wounds of caste, when shaped into verse, can become

weapons of freedom. Each of these poets finds a different way of making language strong enough to carry what they have lived. Dhasal gives us the raw, unpolished reality of the urban slum. Bansode writes with quiet grief about a mother's body worn down by labor. Kandasamy meets centuries of hierarchy with the sharp edge of intellect. Sukirtharani insists, with fierce clarity, that a Dalit woman's desire is hers to claim.

Together, their work becomes what this paper has called "lyrical testimony." This is not just poetry that records suffering. It is poetry that builds a different kind of memory—one that refuses to let pain be forgotten and instead turns it into something that speaks with both political force and artistic power. In doing so, these four poets answer a question that lies at the heart of their tradition: how do you hold on to your humanity when the very culture around you has been built to deny it?

Their answer is worth listening to. Poetry, when it comes from the margins, cannot afford to be neutral. It must carry what Babasaheb Ambedkar called the "spirit of revolt." In the hands of Dhasal, Bansode, Kandasamy, and Sukirtharani, the lyric becomes something more than art—it becomes a hammer strong enough to break the chains of caste. They have not simply added new voices to Indian literature. They have changed what literature can be, showing that for those who have been silenced, to write is already to begin the work of setting oneself free.

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