

Transcending Linguistic Frontiers: The Multilingual Dynamics of Decentering English in Dalit Literature

Deboleena Chakraborty

Assistant Professor

Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata, India
University of Engineering and Management, Kolkata, India

Abstract: This paper explores the transformative linguistic landscape in Dalit literature, with a particular focus on the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal. Dhasal's poetic expression stands as a poignant testament to the decolonization of language within the Dalit literary sphere, challenging the hegemony of English and its normative structures. Through a meticulous examination of Dhasal's works, we unravel the multilingual tapestry he weaves, deftly blending Marathi with elements of other Indian languages, dialects, and even English. This bilingual and multilingual creative process serves as a radical departure from the conventional literary norms, symbolizing a profound act of resistance and reclamation. By decentering English and embracing linguistic diversity, Dhasal crafts a powerful narrative that amplifies the marginalized voices of the Dalit community. This paper navigates through Dhasal's linguistic deviations, elucidating how they not only redefine literary expression but also underscore the socio-political significance of language in subverting dominant discourses.

keywords: Decentering language, Dalit literature, Normative and regional English

I am a venereal sore in the private part of language.

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.

There's no moonlight anywhere;

There's no water anywhere.

A rabid fox is tearing off my flesh with its teeth;

And a terrible venom-like cruelty

Spreads out from my monkey-bone.

Recognising the importance of Dalit writing lies in its ability to challenge the

dominance of the English language and provide a platform for marginalised perspectives and voices. Throughout history, English literature has predominantly been shaped by the viewpoints and stories of privileged social groups, often neglecting the narratives of marginalised individuals, like Dalits. Dalit literature, written in local languages and dialects, challenges the prevailing influence by highlighting the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit communities. Dalit writers utilise vernacular languages to assert their cultural identity and make their literature more accessible to a wider audience within their own communities. Furthermore, Dalit writing often delves into the analysis and critique of power dynamics and oppressive systems that are deeply ingrained in society, such as language hierarchies. Dalit authors utilise their work to challenge the notion that English is the only legitimate medium for literary expression and demonstrate the richness and complexity of non-English languages. Dalit literature plays a significant role in the process of linguistic and cultural decolonization, allowing marginalised communities to assert their own identities and narratives in a way that is self-determined. As a result, this helps to expand and spread the dominant influence of the English language in the field of literature. Recognising the importance of Dalit writing lies in its ability to challenge the dominance of the English language, providing a platform for marginalised perspectives and voices. Throughout history, English literature has predominantly been shaped by the viewpoints and stories of the more privileged segments of society, often neglecting the narratives of marginalised individuals, like Dalits. Dalit literature, written in local languages and dialects, challenges the prevailing influence by highlighting the experiences, struggles, and aspirations of Dalit communities. Dalit writers utilise vernacular languages to assert their cultural identity and make their literature more accessible to a wider range of readers within their own communities. Furthermore, Dalit writing often delves into the analysis and critique of power dynamics and oppressive systems that are deeply ingrained in society, such as language hierarchies. Dalit authors employ their work to challenge the notion that English is the only legitimate medium for literary expression and to demonstrate the richness and complexity of languages beyond English.

Dalit literature is crucial in the process of linguistic and cultural decolonisation, since it empowers marginalised populations to assert their distinct identities and narratives on their own terms. Consequently, this facilitates the amplification and dissemination of the prevailing impact of the English language in the realm of literature. One could argue that this idea undermines the hierarchical nature of the caste system, emphasising the intrinsic value of every individual.

The foundation of this consciousness stems from a profound comprehension of Ambedkarite thought. Acknowledging the awareness of Dalit consciousness fosters a

profound comprehension among persons who have undergone a condition of servitude, rendering them acutely aware of their own subordination. A comprehension of Dalit identity serves as a vital foundation for Dalit writing, setting it apart from the perspectives of other writers. The primary areas of emphasis in Dalit literature include identity, aesthetics, language, style, themes, forms, and situations. The presence of theoretical, literary, and critical aspects is clearly apparent.

The term 'literature' has its roots in the Latin word *Littera*, which denotes the letters of the alphabet and conveys that anything written or printed can be classified as such. There are various approaches to extracting meaning from literary discourse. The approaches can be classified into four primary categories: author oriented, text oriented, context oriented, and reader oriented.

Utilising rigorous evaluative methods and approaches is crucial when analysing Dalit literature in order to uncover its deeper significance. This is due to the wide range of elements that literature encompasses, including aesthetic, linguistic, social, cultural, and ideological values. Over the course of literary appreciation and criticism, there has been a significant shift in focus. Rather than solely examining the author, attention is now given to elements such as the text, its content, the context in which it was written, and the analysis from the reader's perspective. There are multiple ways to analyse literary discourses, such as biographical, social, psychological, structural, archetypal, anthropological, post-structural, modern, post-modern, colonial, post-colonial, and aesthetic viewpoints. The New critical approach and formalism delve into the concepts of art for its intrinsic value and art for its impact on life and society. The dynamic relationship between modern and cyber criticism forms the basis for the construction of significance. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said delves into the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach. Meanwhile, esteemed scholars such as Barthes, Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and others highlight the vast array of meanings. Norman Holland, Juass, Stanley Fish, and Riffaterre have made noteworthy contributions to the advancement of the reader-centered approach. An all-encompassing evaluation of Dalit Literature should take into account its aesthetic, literary, social, and cultural dimensions. Therefore, it embraces a wide range of literary and critical viewpoints. Understanding the significance of every artefact within the broader social and cultural framework is crucial, as they are intricately connected to society. The categorization of 'Indian literature' or 'Indian English literature' is inadequate in its naming. The translation of Dalit literature in Indian languages into English broadens its impact, reaching a wider audience and enabling a global understanding. Presented in English, this work becomes a crucial part of English literature, inviting the Euro-American critical tradition to acknowledge, defend, and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.

Indian literature includes a wide range of literary works written in English by individuals of Indian descent, regardless of their diverse linguistic, literary, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This concept fails to acknowledge the literary works or artefacts in Indian languages as a result of colonial and elite ideology. Amidst the complexities surrounding the term 'Indian English Literature', it is remarkable for its unmistakable 'Indianness' that shines through in its literary creations. The application of the concept of distinctiveness or uniqueness is also evident in Dalit literature and how it portrays the Dalit identity. According to Homi Bhabha, translation is a dynamic process of cultural communication. In his analysis, he delves into the cultural challenges faced by migrants, drawing a parallel to Benjamin's notion of "untranslatability".

Language provides a higher function that extends beyond simple communication. The majority of Dalits, who do not have access to formal schooling or language instruction, possess an important and distinctive perspective due to their ability to express their thoughts and engage with the world in their native language. In the absence of formal language instruction, individuals can delve into and articulate concepts in a manner that surpasses the constraints of written language. Minority populations frequently utilise dialects and variations of widely spoken languages. These groups may also be part of historically marginalised or socioeconomically disadvantaged segments of society.

In an effort to elevate these voices, many researchers and scholars have taken on the task of translating literature written by Dalit writers from their original languages into more widely understood languages. The idea of translating a piece of work is certainly praiseworthy, but it is essential to meticulously tackle the numerous challenges that arise during the process. The vocabulary employed by Dalit scholars is deeply rooted in their personal experiences and occupations, which are profoundly shaped by their caste status. The Dalits have long been situated on the periphery of society, living beyond the confines of village life. Many Dalit writers incorporate the dialects they use in their speech, leading to a unique translation within the mainstream. Before we dive into the complexities of culture, translation, and untranslatability, it is essential to first examine the language and experiences of the Dalit community (formerly known as untouchables).

There exists a distinct contrast between the cultural encounters of a privileged English-speaking group and the seemingly unattainable cultural realm of Dalits. Hence, the English translation of Dalit writing fails to fully grasp the profound experiences of caste society and faces challenges in expressing their distinct perspective within the domain of knowledge creation. However, Dalits gained a deep understanding of their social standing, which was perpetuated by oppressive cultural forces. They discovered different ways to challenge the hegemony of the Brahmanical system, and one of these

approaches involved creating their own body of literature.

Autobiographies, short stories, and poems have become prominent subjects of scholarly discussion. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise the importance of their oral traditions, like Jalsa and Bheem-Geet, in their culture of resistance, which regrettably has been disregarded in scholarly conversations. There is a clear void in English-speaking academic circles regarding the examination of the oral literary tradition of Dalits. However, upon analysing the post Ambedkar Dalit resistance, it is clear that their literary discourse has achieved a noteworthy milestone. Delving into the themes of class struggle and the fight against untouchability, this scholarly text explores the concept of human identity and its connection to Marxist social values. It delves into the study of education and the impact of influential figures like Buddha, Charvak, Jyotirao Phule, King Shahu, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. In addition, it delves into the subaltern viewpoint on identity. Dalit literature is a profound and significant literary movement that has arisen with the noble aim of eliminating the deeply ingrained social injustices of untouchability, caste discrimination, and gender bias. The ultimate aim is to promote equal opportunities and justice in all areas of life. Dalit Panther and various other Dalit organisations are noteworthy illustrations. A comprehensive examination is carried out on the representation of Dalits in literature penned by individuals from higher castes, with a particular emphasis on the varying portrayals by Dalit and Non-Dalit authors, ranging from compassionate and understanding depictions to exaggerated caricatures. The essence of Dalit literature is rooted in the notion of Dalit Consciousness, a revolutionary mindset intricately connected to the spirit of resilience and resistance.

In the realm of academic discourse, dalit literary discourse is often overlooked and marginalised in the language hierarchies. It has remained on the outskirts because Dalit literature is only available in the vernacular languages.

However, the presence of English translations of texts written by Dalits has provided opportunities for intellectual discussion and reflection on the oppressive experiences within the Dalit community. The origins of Dalit literature are heavily influenced by African-American literature, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Panther Movement, and the Dalit Panther Movement. The various ideological, literary, and theoretical influences have greatly influenced the ongoing fight for social justice and equality.

A comprehensive understanding and interpretation of Dalit literature requires the incorporation of diverse approaches and methods from both Eastern and Western perspectives. The current state of Indian literary theory is lacking in its comprehensiveness, as it is heavily influenced by Hinduism and follows traditional Sanskrit literary and critical norms. Applying theories from both Indian and Western

perspectives is a challenging task that requires careful interpretation. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that this application of theory falls short. By acknowledging its limitations, we can explore new and distinctive interpretations of Dalit literature. This study aims to explore various aspects of Dalit literature and its impact on the conventional use of the English language.

Translation is often seen as a process that takes place between various languages. However, as Juri Lotman (1990) suggests, translation has the potential to take place across different sign systems within what he calls a 'semiosphere' - which refers to the entire collection of sign systems. Therefore, the process of translation takes place when meaning is transferred from one system of signs to another, even if these systems are not completely compatible. This transfer occurs across various boundaries and imbalances, propelled by the intricate interplay between these systems of signs. The understanding of the mechanism that drives creative innovation is crucial.

Lotman's theoretical framework goes beyond the traditional understanding of literature as a static, printed form. Instead, it includes the visual, musical, and performative aspects of culture. Understanding Indian cultural practices as a whole, and delving into Dhasal's poems, proves to be immensely valuable.

From this standpoint, the literary works of Marathi poets such as Mukteshwar, Dnyaneshwar, the Varkaris, and the poets of the Mahanubhava sect can be seen as reinterpretations and analyses of traditional Sanskrit stories in the later mediaeval era. These writings were produced in a language that was comprehensible to the ordinary populace who lacked literacy in Sanskrit. These translations showcase inventive advancements and reconcile the disparity between asymmetrical and hierarchic languages. The Marathi language employed for the translation of these manuscripts encompassed a diverse range of folk, oral, and performative metres and styles. This facilitated the accessibility of these academic texts to the broader population.

After the 14th century, Marathi poetry experienced a significant change as Persian and Arabic words and idioms were incorporated into the language. This linguistic influence occurred during the rule of the Sultans and had a significant impact on the Marathi semiosphere. During the 18th century, there was a notable revival of Sanskritised poetics, which gained prominence under the governance of the Brahmin Peshwa rulers. During this period, there was a notable consolidation of the intellectual foundation of Marathi literature and culture. The semiosphere can be understood as comprising two distinct regions: the 'core' and the 'periphery'. At the heart of our being, we create self-descriptions to shape our shared identity and establish clear boundaries that set us apart from others.

The development of modern Marathi poetry and literature can be attributed to the

late 19th century, during a time when colonial education and the growth of print capitalism had a notable impact. At that time, there was a translation of English literary texts, like Palgrave's Golden Treasury, into Marathi, which led to the development of a distinct hybrid language. This language has been embraced by many influential modern Marathi writers as their preferred mode of self-expression. Their self-descriptions often reflected a strong sense of national pride, a romanticised view of history, and a tendency to idealise the history of the upper caste through an Orientalist perspective.

In the mid-1940s, a modernist style of poetry emerged in the Marathi literary landscape through the works of B.S. Mardhekar (1909-1956). This idiom was influenced by the linguistic styles of Euro-American avant-gardes like surrealism and imagism, among others. The piece offered a different viewpoint on Marathi poetry, delving into the harsh realities of urban poverty, explicit sensuality, and despair. In addition, it thoroughly analysed the emotional aspect of the central poetic style in Marathi culture, which has had a significant impact on modern Marathi poetry.

Between 1955 and 1975, there was a notable change in Mardhekar's poetry style. During this period, there was an emergence of a writing style characterised by non-conformity, urban themes, explicit sexual content, and strong political undertones within the little magazine movement. During this period, various literary movements, including Dalit literature, flourished. Nevertheless, this intervention had characteristics reminiscent of the aristocratic, high social class, and manly attributes observed in 19th-century poetry. Within the domain of Marathi discourse, akin to other Indian contexts, a select group of individuals have wielded substantial sway, embodying an esteemed section of society. Their privileged upbringings, shaped by diverse social forces, have profoundly shaped the conception of culture and our shared sense of identity. The core has also generated prevailing notions of "what reality is" or "the world picture".

The entirety of Dalit literature, including Dhasal's poems, serves as a powerful representation of the underlying disparity between the dominant and marginalised elements of society. They explore the contrast between different groups, question the dominant Marathi perspective that marginalises Dalits. Dhasal's poems offer a courageous departure from traditional literary norms as they fearlessly delve into the intricate and often brutal realities of marginalised individuals' daily existence. With an academic flair, he illuminates the paradoxical nature of their existence and the frequently disregarded facets of their world. By examining the research conducted by Lotman and Uspensky (1978), one can gain insight into the notion of culture as the shared memory of a community. This memory is expressed through a series of regulations and principles. The main purpose of this is to establish organisation and coherence in the world. Within this context, Dalit literature, including Dhasal's poems, presents a thought-provoking

examination of the cultural memory, shedding light on the oppressive, exclusive, and brutal elements ingrained within the broader societal structure. They engage in a thorough analysis and strive to redefine the fundamental structure of cultural symbols and meanings, with the ultimate objective of reshaping Marathi cultural identity, memory, and reality. Their goal is to foster a society that is inclusive and equitable, ultimately resulting in a comprehensive overhaul of the existing cultural terrain.

The poetry of the 19th century in Marathi, along with the modernist poetry led by Mardhekar, were both connected to a core minority group, frequently mentioned as the "three and a half percent of the population" by Dhasal. Dhasal introduced Bumbaiya Hindi and Urdu, as well as the languages of marginalised communities, into the world of the modernist avant-garde. This inclusion demonstrates the impact of Kristeva's concept of the abject, as observed in the realm of Kamathipura. Through his work, he skillfully integrated and cleverly mocked Sanskrit words, creating a sense of ambiguity and questioning the narrowness of both contemporary Marathi poetry and modernist style. The influence he has had on future generations of Dalit and non-Dalit Marathi poets is truly remarkable. The works of later poets such as Bhujang Meshram, Arun Kale, Mahendra Bhavre, and Santosh P. Pawar, among others from their generation, showcase the stylistic elements of Dhasal's avant-garde rhetoric.

Namdeo Dhasal's language displays a striking degree of unpredictability.

Exploring Dhasal's poetry or contemplating his politics reveals a myriad of contradictions, complexities, and agonies. In order to fully grasp Namdeo's significance as a poet, thinker, and politician, it is necessary to delve into his visionary perspective. He passionately argued for broadening the understanding of Dalit beyond caste limitations and extending its relevance to the global proletariat movement. This vision was demonstrated in the manifesto to the Dalit Panthers and ultimately resulted in Dhasal's fellow Panthers accusing him of being a Marxist, which led to his expulsion from the organisation. Ambedkarism and Marxism are often seen as ideologically incompatible by many Dalit thinkers and politicians. Many scholars argue that the complexity of the caste system goes beyond a simple class distinction. Followers of Ambedkar's teachings firmly reject the idea that Buddhism is merely a diversion for the common people. However, the fusion of Ambedkarite ideology and Marxism enabled Dhasal to expand the understanding of the term Dalit, while also situating himself and his cultural identity within the complex history of the subcontinent, with a critical and historical approach.

The perceived conflict of ideologies led to Dhasal's marginalisation within the sphere of Dalit politics. Moreover, it infused his poetry with a dynamic and potent element. His poetry has developed into a sharp critique of our society, steering clear of the tendency to romanticise or sugarcoat history, which is often seen in mainstream

depictions. Dhasal's deep exploration and thoughtful examination of the historical context of the ancient civilization in the Indian subcontinent is a significant element of his poetic viewpoint, as showcased in his poem 'Sthayee Dushkaalaatun' from Murkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavla. This quote from Dhasal's work eloquently captures the essence of poetry, as it explores the countless contradictions that exist within the fabric of human civilization and the individual experiences that shape it.

Dhasal's unique style distinguishes him from other Dalit writers. His use of inventive language and semiotic registers sets him apart from his fellow Dalit poets. The complex utilisation of what Chitre refers to as 'bastard language' makes Dhasal's poetry intricate and challenging to comprehend for both a regular Dalit listener and a highly educated reader. The mysterious and thought-provoking imagery, along with the skillful blending of different experiential contexts in his poetry, leaves both newcomers and seasoned readers alike in awe. In 1982, as per Chitre's research findings, Dhasal's poems may prove to be enigmatic and impenetrable to a substantial portion of his audience. The intended reader is likely to be someone who possesses a profound understanding of the local language, as well as Indian and global artistic and political currents, much like Dhasal himself.

The rich and complex nature of Dhasal's poetic language goes well beyond mere words, forms, and linguistics. It explores the world of visual culture, performance, art, and everyday life, creating a semiotic experience that goes beyond the limitations of the printed page. An analysis of Dhasal's use of language as a collection of semiotic registers or signs offers valuable insights into the cultural environments in which his poems were created, disseminated, and consumed.

Ultimately, the significant influence of Dalit literature in questioning the accepted conventions of the English language cannot be emphasised enough. By embracing regional languages and dialects, Dalit literature has become a catalyst for linguistic and cultural decolonization, bringing about significant transformations in the literary world. Through the reclamation of agency over their narratives and identities, Dalit writers challenge the dominance of English and contribute to the literary canon with a wealth of diverse perspectives and linguistic nuances.

Furthermore, Dalit literature serves as a powerful example of the strength and ingenuity found within marginalised communities, providing a space for voices that have historically been suppressed or overlooked. Through their narratives, personal encounters, and insightful analysis of societal inequities, Dalit authors challenge readers to confront unsettling realities about authority, advantage, and subjugation. By doing so, they question the prevailing authority of English as the main language for literary expression and also challenge the systemic inequalities that uphold linguistic hierarchies.

In the ever-expanding realm of global literature, the significance of diversity and inclusion is being widely acknowledged. Within this context, Dalit literature stands out as a source of inspiration and potential. The enduring relevance and impact of this phenomenon lies in its remarkable ability to bridge cultural divides and foster empathy and understanding across linguistic boundaries. Through the exploration of Dalit literature, readers are encouraged to delve into fresh perspectives, question preconceived ideas, and actively participate in the ongoing fight for social justice and equality.

In conclusion, Dalit literature serves as a powerful tool of resistance against existing linguistic structures, encouraging a reinterpretation of artistic communication and cultural portrayal. By actively involving ourselves with Dalit narratives, we make progress towards achieving a literary sphere that is marked by equity, variety, and inclusiveness. This envisioned world embraces and honours every story, guaranteeing that each voice is acknowledged, appreciated, and regarded.

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