

BOOK REVIEW

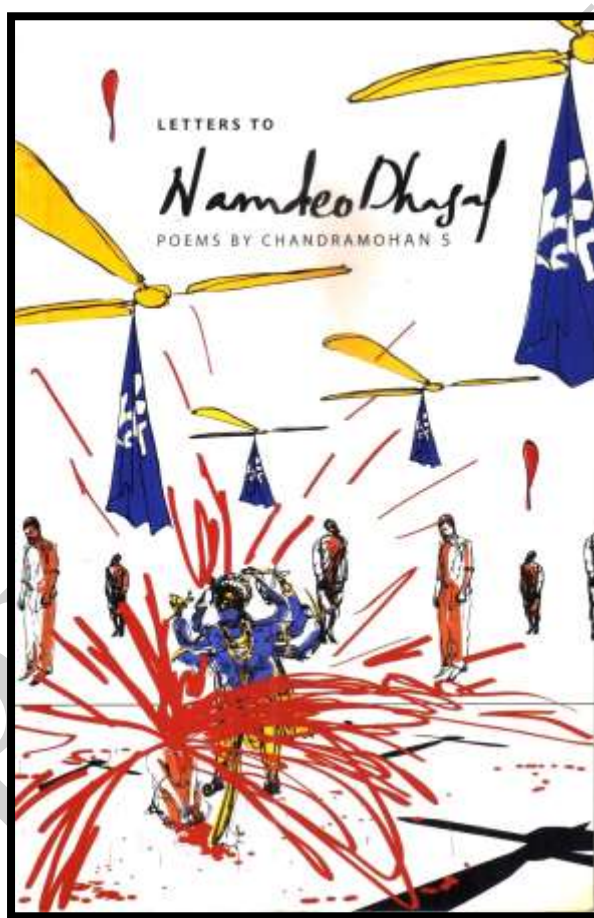
POETRY OF PROTEST

LETTERS TO NAMDEO DHASAL: POEMS BY CHANDRAMOHAN S:

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Reviewed by Manzar Imam



Writing poetry at times of protests is not new. Some of the best poems are produced during some of the worst crises. Chandramohan's is no exception. However, what makes his poetry exceptionally powerful is the contemporariness of the early 21st century which has witnessed probably the greatest and fastest shifts in human history both locally and globally.

If personal is political, so is local global today. The issues with certain different hues and angles remain similar everywhere. Issues of poverty, religion, regionalism, justice, eliticism, caste, climate and literary populism exist in some form or the other across the globe. Chandramohan S tries to locate some of these and other issues in the Indian state of Kerala. Despite a high literacy rate, many patriarchal practices and caste-based evils keep hounding the God's Own Country.

Majority of Chandramohan's poetry focuses on the long-continuing battle, but his main thrust is the problem of caste which has dehumanized society to the extent of unimaginable bestiality. Nangeli's cutting off her breast as part of sacrifice to end tax collection from Avarna women for covering their breasts in public sends shivers down the spine. *Caste in a Local Train* exposes the mentality running like the life-blood in the everyday journey that ends up questioning with what the poet terms a direct Yorker i.e. "What is your caste?"

As India is raging over heinous incidents of rape and murder with many newspapers and television channels trying to divert people's attention to non-issues, Chandramohan's poetic conscience awakes and registers protest in "The Rape and Murder of a Tribal Girl" exposing the hypocrisy of the media and those in positions of power and responsibility:

No newspaper carried a headline or a photo feature,
No youth were roused to protests,
No city's life came to a standstill,
No furore in the parliament,
No nation's conscience was haunted,
No Prime Minister addressed the nation,
No TV channel discussions,
No police officials were transferred or suspended,
No candle light marches,
No billion women rising,
A tribal girl was raped and murdered.

Chandramohan's rage against social ills meted out to Dalits, tribals and minorities shows his poems' true value and strength. His poetry is part of the narrative that needs to build up on streets, in media and academia in the so-called post-truth era where the new normal has been taking the centre stage.

This collection named after a great Marathi poet Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014) is timely. Dhasal's language was rude for the elite but that fits well in our current contexts of everything being redefined from an elitist perspective, excluding the million minor voices.

Chandramohan's incisive language in which he talks about white lingerie, pink panties, periodic crimson, still born babies and ruptured caste hymens shows his sharp criticism and protest against the ill-practices and places him at par with Kerala's "Sahodaranist tradition of subversive and iconoclastic poetry" as pointed out by Ajay Sekher.

Each of the 49 poems requires separate articles to describe the background and the agony that it carries. The poem "Salesgirl" is one which has a rather milder provocation:

She waits till the clock ticks five
to relieve her throbbing bladder.
She waits till the clock ticks eleven
to relieve her stiff legs.
She waits till the clock ticks every minute
for every customer
as if camera lights flashed from their eye balls
She has to keep a smiling face ready
with the serenity of an air hostess
with her belly button bared!

Bio:

Chandramohan S:

Based in Trivandrum, Kerala, Chandramohan S published his first collection of poems *Warscape Verses* (Delhi, Authorspress) in 2014. “Letters to Namdeo Dhasal” contains poems on issues of great significance in a language which sounds rude but is real, provocative but painfully true, harsh but humane.

Manzar Imam:

The reviewer is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia and has done an online program “Contending Modernities” of the University of Notre Dame, USA