

# Dalit Poetry and the Aesthetics of Traumatic Materialism

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## Abstract

This article examines and theorises the emergence of an aesthetic of Dalit poetry that it terms ‘traumatic materialism’. It resists the tendency to treat Dalit poetry as social documentary, and instead unravels an aesthetic that builds on the realist mode but moves beyond it. Studying two main themes in Dalit poems, corporeal trauma and labour, the article proposes that traumatic materialism forces us to move beyond the realist mode of recording the eye-witnessing of corporeal pain in everyday Dalit lives to ‘bearing witness’ to something unspeakable and not quite visible, which is the pain’s subtext.

## Keywords

Dalit poetry, aesthetic, realism, traumatic materialism, eye-witnessing, bearing witness

Hoping that merit would accrue  
To the family in the hereafter,  
They fed the Brahmin a bellyful  
Of rice, and then forced

The girl they’d brought from Kollam, who  
Was cleaning vessels in the backyard, to  
Sleep with him.

After he—having feasted  
And then enjoyed  
Coitus with the girl—left ...

– Rajkumar, ‘Untitled Poem—I’

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Nail polish begins to flake  
 Along with blackened vessels.  
 When the nails break,  
 They could be completely trimmed  
 (The chores too perfected).  
 – Vijila, ‘I Can’t Grow My Nails’

Common to both these excerpts from Dalit poetry is an embodied aesthetic of suffering. In the first case the woman is exploited as a menial worker and a sexual object. In the second case the girl recognises the essential incompatibility of prettifying—*aestheticising*—herself with the conditions of labour in which she, and her body, are located. The register stays firmly close to the material realities of poverty-stricken lives, of pain, dirt and corporeal suffering. In both cases, the focus is on the everyday—vessel imagery appears in both poems—with no apparent flights of poetic metaphor or symbolism.

What, then, can we say of the aesthetic mode of these poems? The overarching assumption of this essay is that Dalit poetry should not be treated merely as social documents that map suffering, victims’ lives and pain. Rather, it is essential to locate a specific literariness arising from specific socio-historical conditions in a poetry that defies traditional accounts of the ‘poetic’. Aesthetics, it would be a truism to state, is historically located, and critical appreciation that takes recourse to an aesthetic evaluation of poetry needs to be aware of this ‘situatedness’ of aesthetic norms. Making a mere inventory of social wrongs—like Amnesty International reports—is not what Dalit poetry does. As this article demonstrates, Dalit aesthetics worry about adequate strategies of ‘representation’ of the social. The gritty realism of the poetry or prose produced by victims must be read as an aesthetic mode that ‘resists’ the documentary aesthetic of Human-Rights-Commission narratives, even though they too appear to serve the purpose of highlighting social injustice and endemic suffering. Drawing upon the same social conditions, but complicating the mode of representation by generating metaphors and literary styles that seek to go beyond mere documentation, Dalit poetry offers us a socially embedded aesthetics of suffering. That is, we need to situate even the aesthetic norms of this kind of writing within the social contexts of poverty, discrimination, oppression and suffering, and examine the literariness of representing these conditions. If there is a literary style or mode that emerges from specific historical and social contexts (as Terry Eagleton has demonstrated throughout his work) then what would be the literary style for Dalits to describe, even *aestheticise*,

their context? It is this situatedness that the present article underscores when unpacking the socio-political aesthetics of Dalit poetry.

Certain socio-historical events, especially traumatic ones such as genocide or caste oppression (which, we could rightly say, is ‘continuing’ genocide), demand specific socio-aesthetics. Michael Rothberg, writing on Holocaust representations, speaks of a ‘traumatic realism’, insisting that we locate the everyday with the extreme, or the extreme within the everyday, when we perform cultural analysis. For Rothberg, traumatic realism is a ‘form of documentation and historical cognition attuned to the demands of extremity ...’ (Rothberg, 2000, p. 14). It is an aesthetic ‘bound to survival’ (Rothberg, 2000, p. 140). Distinguishing this from other aesthetic stylisations, he argues that traumatic realism frames the aesthetics with signifiers of economy and corporeal materiality (Rothberg, 2000, p. 101). Rothberg’s point about the coexistence of the extreme in the everyday has found resonance in contemporary work on Human Rights, life narratives and victims’ memoirs (Nayar, 2012).

This article is an attempt to unravel what I believe is a different aesthetic emerging in Dalit poetry. My argument extends Rothberg’s exposition of an aesthetic of traumatic realism, suitably calibrated, to work with Dalit poetry. I opt for ‘traumatic materialism’ over Rothberg’s realism because I wish to not only underscore everyday trauma’s material dimensions but to go beyond the mere realist recitation of historical and social events. Traumatic materialism is the realist aesthetic ‘amplified’ to describe corporeal suffering (which includes labouring bodies, scarred and bruised bodies) and the material contexts of Dalit bodies so as to move beyond mere referencing of events to gesture at something unspeakable beneath the everyday trauma. Traumatic realism might capture the everyday and make us become eyewitnesses but traumatic materialism’s metaphorisation, literariness—aesthetics, in other words—and symbolisation of the hidden cultural economy force us to bear witness to what is not implicit in the poetry. Metaphorisation and symbolisation—the literary styles, so to speak, of the Dalit poetry discussed—amplify and extend the documentary–real because of the realist’s seeming inadequacy to capture the unspeakable horror that lies beneath the corporeal trauma of everyday lives. By ‘unspeakable horror’ I wish to indicate the structural conditions of endemic inequality and injustice that cannot be captured simply by accounts of Gross Domestic Product, unemployment statistics or even realist accounts of poverty. ‘Unspeakable horror’ refers to an entire ideological–structural condition that is often invisible (such as caste), dislike and hatred (the failure of affirmative action to attain, for particular

categories of people, civil citizenship and not just political citizenship) and sustained humiliations.

If I may summarise my argument ahead of the explication, traumatic materialism is the aesthetic expression of the historical marginality of certain lives that lies buried beneath the ‘surface’ of (mere) corporeal pain. This aesthetic might take recourse to metaphorisation, which appears, in contrast to the social–documentary realism detailing everyday lives, as anti-realism, but is actually, in my argument, an amplification, stretching (as Frantz Fanon famously said about Marxism) realism in order to bring to the surface something more. Therefore traumatic materialism is what constitutes the literary in Dalit poetry, and prevents the poetry from being simply a narration of bodily suffering. It also forces us, as we shall see, to move beyond a simple referencing—eye-witnessing—of historical events in the life of a Dalit to ‘bearing witness’ to deeper social conditions, to that which cannot be seen, to the unspeakable. It is this metaphorisation and symbolisation of the corporeal that distinguishes Dalit poetry from just another account of pain.

I examine two key themes in Dalit poetry, corporeal trauma and labour, to unravel this aesthetic. I track the shift from traumatic realism to traumatic materialism in the poetry so that I can demonstrate how the poetry moves from being a mere chronicle of bodily trauma to a careful subtext of symbolic, unspeakable or barely visible conditions beneath.

## Corporeal Trauma

Sukirtharani opens the poem ‘Portrait of My Village’ (Sukirtharani, 2013) with olfactory and tactile images, the smell of gruel, bruised hands and hungry stomachs: ‘the thick sulphurous smell/of the fermented gruel’, ‘hands abraded by *ulundu* plants’, ‘the tormenting starvation’. She centres the body of the lower caste through visually evocative realist description, the realism conveying the material and corporeal harshness of everyday Dalit lives. This is the traumatic realism of the poem.

Yet the poem, which has thus far eschewed any register except the most realistic, concludes, oddly, with metaphorisation:

Our bare feet are drenched  
 By the *pain of caste that drips from our lips*  
 As we drink tea from palm-leaf cups,  
 Standing at an untouchable distance,

While the portrait of our village  
Frames itself at a place of double existence,  
Always vigilant. [Emphasis added]

The ‘pain of caste’ becomes liquefied in Sukirtharani’s verse (resonating with the liquid tea, consumed in supposedly non-polluting—disposable—palm-leaf cups), and ‘drenches’ the bare feet of the Dalit labourers. Liquid pain becomes the metaphor that transports (in keeping with the function of a metaphor, or *meta-phora*, to transport), through this aesthetic of traumatic materialism, the social conditions of caste discrimination from the lifeworld (in)to the body and vice versa. That is, I read the image of the ‘dripping’ pain of the Dalit body as an instance of an aesthetic of traumatic materialism that pushes to an extreme the realist mode in order to convey the co-presence of the extreme within the everyday and something else as well. We are seeing an amplification of traditional realism through recourse to a metaphor that is far in excess of the realist mode so as to capture the unspeakable depths of this material reality. I forward the argument that the realist seems inadequate to capture the extent of endemic corporeal and psychological suffering, and so the recourse to amplified realism—or traumatic materialism—becomes essential.

Traumatic materialism as an aesthetic suggests—even if it is not explicitly stated—an extreme that lies beyond what the poem’s (realist) images capture, an extreme that is gestured at, often through metaphor and anti-realist representation. The material sign of ‘tea’ being drunk from ‘untouchable’ cups is transferred to the metaphor ‘dripping pain’. Further, the ‘double existence’ of the penultimate line gestures at the schizophrenic condition of a village of great natural beauty as well as horrific social realities, where the latter are not always inscribed or visible.

In the excerpt at the start of this article, a working girl is forced into sexual intercourse with a Brahmin. Her untouchable body suddenly becomes more than touchable. The trauma here is scripted directly on to her body. Rajkumar’s use of the realist register—‘coitus’ rather than even ‘sex’—not only conveys the sheer ruthlessness of the libidinal economy—and I shall return to this point in the next section—but also the inescapable nature of the girl’s trauma (one notes that Rajkumar specifies ‘girl’ and not ‘woman’). Later a danseuse, lured by the same Brahmin, eventually bleeds to death in a ‘dry jungle’. In Vijila’s poem, later lines speak of the woman’s body being ‘touched’ by ‘venomous fingers’.

In Sukirtharani's 'Untitled Poem—II' the lower-caste girl recounts how she guarded a carcass and brags about what she ate—leftover rice 'gathered as alms... turned piping hot'—but she could not escape the 'teacher's cane' (Sukirtharani, 2011). She says

I broke down and cried  
My grief invisible to  
the world's gaze.

Note the number of references to seeing (crying eyes, 'invisibility', 'gaze'), one in each line in a set of three lines. Sukirtharani deploys what seems like anti-realism. If the girl is crying her grief is indeed visible, since tears are on the outside and deemed to be a sign of an internal/mental state. Tears blur the distinction between inside and outside because it is only when they emerge from the inside to the outside that the world senses what lies inside. Turning the body inside out by revealing a depth of emotion, tears are the material signs of an inner condition (I am taking recourse here to J. Hillis Miller's virtuoso reading of Tennyson's famous 'Tears, Idle Tears' in his *Topographies*, 1995). But the protagonist-speaker claims that despite the tears her grief is 'invisible'. Miller notes that tears 'unveil and veil at the same time' (Miller, 1995, p. 144), an apposite description of Sukirtharani's image, where, even as she reveals her despair in the form of the mute language of tears, something, she says, remains invisible. I propose that rather than this being an instance of anti-realism what Sukirtharani is performing is a clever metaphorisation. The tears are linked ostensibly, in the girl's narration, to the grief caused by the beating the teacher administers. That is, the tears are, at one level, 'produced' by the beating. This is the realism of the narration. Yet the subtext suggests something else. The grief is produced due to the beating which itself may be traced to caste-based discrimination faced by the girl 'sitting friendless/in the back row'. What is visible and conveyed through the realist mode is the grief of the beating. The odd appearance of the word 'invisible' suggests that the deeper grief and therefore the real cause are invisible to the world. If she sits 'friendless' who is to observe her tears, who is to be moved by them (since that is what tears, as material signs, do to observers: move them) to enquire after any deeper reasons she may have to cry? Traumatic materialism is the materiality of the signs (tears) that help Sukirtharani to convey something invisible.

Realism enables Sukirtharani to posit a key distinction between the students 'eye-witnessing' the girl's beating and the suggestion that,

through the image of invisibility, nobody ‘bears witness’ to the deeper reality: caste-based oppression. Working with Kelly Oliver’s distinction, ‘eye-witnessing’ is the result of being physically present at the time and place of an event, while ‘bearing witness’ is about ‘a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts’ (Oliver, 2004, p. 80), about interpreting an extreme or horrific event, about bearing witness to the unspeakable. I suggest that Sukirtharani’s use of invisibility gestures at the need to not merely eye-witness the girl’s beating but to bear witness to the humiliation that is not (only) about corporeal pain but also the transcendental condition of constant humiliation. This is what traumatic materialism does: it focuses on a corporeally traumatic event through realist narration and amplifies it through metaphor and imagery (‘invisibility’, or the earlier poem’s ‘dripping’ pain) in order to gesture towards something larger or beyond what realism states. I argue that traumatic materialism is amplified realism and calls for attention to a trauma that goes beyond the corporeal, to hidden structures of inequality and injustice. Amplification draws attention to itself, suggesting, I propose, the inadequacy of realism to capture trauma. The resultant aesthetic that plays on the interlinked symbols of liquids, invisibility and tears gestures at something that is only marginally ‘made visible’ when the victim cries, when in fact the reality lies far deeper. Tears are visible, ‘corporeal’ markers of invisible social structures.

## (Im)material Labour and Trauma

Kabilan’s (2013) ‘If I Go as Helper in a Construction Job’ examines the endless possibilities of slander a lower caste/class woman suffers entirely because of the conditions of her labour, labour that is essential for her survival. The speaker says that if she helps at a construction site she is accused of being the head mason’s concubine, and if she sells flowers she is deemed the concubine of the policemen on the beat. Tired of these charges, she concludes the poem with

If my man was doing good, why would I send my adolescent girl  
To peddle *idlis*?

As a poem that foregrounds the materiality of labour and poverty through traumatic realism, it also draws our attention to the cultural economy around the woman’s body. Her trauma is, of course, embodied by virtue of the hard work she undertakes. But this same body that

labours is trapped within a cultural economy, in which her labour is made 'immaterial', the husband/partner only speculating about who she uses her body with. In other words, the financial economy that centres on the productive or labouring female body is consistently ignored in favour of a cultural economy (attitudes, values, beliefs and prejudices, linked to economic practices and processes) that ponders the woman's sexual drives and desires. With no reference to the quantum of labour or the money she brings in (the financial economy), the questions and speculations are concerned solely with her moral code and bodily desires, and the (social) meanings circulating around the woman's body (this last is, of course, the cultural economy). At the end of the poem the woman carefully performs the same shift from material to immaterial labour. She confesses, in the course of a rhetorical question, that her adolescent daughter—the delineation of age and gender is careful and in the neutral register of a census taker—is sent out to work as well. And then a turn to the question of cultural economy—a minor (and so, under Indian law, unemployable), a girl whose safety is threatened, harsh working conditions—to draw attention to the man's inability or unwillingness to work, highlighted by the conditional 'if': 'If my man was doing good ...'. We as readers understand that the woman speaker is not simply recounting a factual history of her own labour or her daughter's, but forcing us to bear witness to something more: the constant humiliation within the 'symbolic' (name-calling, insults, insinuations). This last is implicit rather than explicit; what is explicit is the account of corporeal labour.

In Vincent Raj's (2013) 'Clutching the End of My *Saree*', a mother speaks of her children following her around 'in dismay and distress', and thereby becoming unwitting ear- and eye-witnesses to the verbal abuse thrown at her by a policeman:

'Slut! Hot as ever, aren't you?'  
The taunts of the police  
I feel I'm dead.

The mother, trying to earn a living, is unable to avert such abusive encounters. The poem suggests that she is trapped in a situation where, to bring in some income, she cannot avoid doing whatever labour she performs. However, this part of her life—the materiality of her labour—is rendered immaterial in preference for the symbolic 'values' and prejudices placed on a woman walking the streets. The excessive libidinal economy that operates across genders in such exploitative contexts at



once reduces the woman to a sexual object but refuses to see her 'work' as any kind of labour. The libidinal economy therefore only works with signifiers of a cultural variety while wholly erasing the brutality of the financial economy.

Kabilan and Vincent Raj use the realist tone when recounting conversations. Abuse and description foreground the two key themes, labour and trauma, in their poetry.

In M.R. Renukumar's (2013) 'The Silent Beast' the speaker is a woman, and the poem is essentially an account, again within an aesthetic of traumatic realism, of a routine day in her life, detailing her daily labours from clearing the cattle shed to collecting a few jars of water. Every stanza begins with a 'must', suggesting both an imperative and a necessity. Like Kabilan's poem, Renukumar's also underscores, this time through traumatic materialism, the intersection of financial and cultural economies. The woman practises thrift, rigorously, as in the form of a reminder to 'not forget to mark/with a pencil in the calendar/the measure of the day's milk/the man took with him'. She is forced to scrounge: 'must collect the rice-water/from the backyard/of three neighbouring houses'. And she

Must cross the singeing stares  
Of the anglers on the canal bank  
While returning with  
The earthen jar against the hip.

Thus, in addition to scrounging for food, collecting and heaving water collected from here and there and the sheer stress of physical labour, the woman also has to withstand the contemptuous or perhaps lustful stares of men. The use of the metaphor of 'singeing', and by extension burning skin as the irreducible materiality of the sign, suggests the language of trauma—as anybody who reads narratives of sexual abuse, whether Pinki Virani's *Bitter Chocolate* or RAHI's *The House I Grew up In*, would testify. It also points to the very embodied nature of this trauma. The woman's skin burns as the stares alight on her person. Like Kabilan and Sukirtharani, Renukumar's metaphorisation directs us to the trauma resulting from the intersection of the woman's material labour (representing the financial economy) and its symbolic immateriality (the cultural economy), where the men do not see a labouring woman but just a woman's body, available for easy exploitation perhaps. Eye-witnessing is attention to the female form and not bearing witness to the structural social conditions that render that form exploitable.

The woman's body is again the locus of the two economies in Kalesh's (2013) 'Hairpin Bend'. Of an unnamed adolescent girl the poem says

Fixing hairpins in her ...  
 She leaves.  
 On the way even if anyone comments  
 On the growing heaviness of her tiny breasts  
 And the fine down on her limbs ...  
 She says nothing.

The narrator speculates about the reason for the girl's aestheticising actions, even though 'I haven't asked about these preparations', and concludes with a tone of considerable certainty that the girl has been asked or forced to do something for a living:

At dawn  
 Before anyone wakes  
 When I go to that bend  
 I might find something or the other there  
 Hairpin legs apart or something ....

The young girl's body is the site of labour, but also, as the conclusion indicates, the subject of social opinion, opprobrium and slurs. Though the girl may not be ready for such labour—the poem's tone appears to imply sexual labour—she is forced into it for survival:

Mercy dear, do not say anything  
 Without knowing  
 Of the blood  
 Falling on the ground  
 When my black sister,  
 Tired of puffing at the fire,  
 Pines as a lover  
 And turns into dust as mother.

In Sunny Kavikkad's (2011) 'With Love' the daughter's lineage is traced not only to her mother but to the kind of life and labour that was the mother's lot. In M.B. Manoj's (2011) 'Interview', the sexually exploited woman is asked, 'How can we trust you women?' She is threatened with 'when I get tired of you/I'll go somewhere else'. The mother in M.R. Renukumar's (2011) 'The Question Paper' is occupied with

'smooth[ing] soiled notes' while the elder sister has to 'go to the neighbour/to borrow fire'.

In Mathiavannan's (2011) 'Untitled Poem', the grandmother 'rais[es] her family on her own/while Granddad wandered, irresponsible', even as her efforts are effaced because the man has 'a woman in every town'. In S. Joseph's (2011) 'My Sister's Bible', the eponymous Bible, with nothing of religious value, contains instead 'a ration-book', a 'loan-application form' and a 'card' from the moneylender. The sister is shown preparing for a life of labour, for the battle to merely survive (the moneylender, Joseph notes, is a 'cut-throat'). While Joseph's poem does not exactly fit the bill of corporeal trauma, it does present the girl's future scenario with material signs that go beyond the immediate setting of everyday lives, anticipating a certain kind of life to come.

What I term 'immaterial labour' is the devaluation of a woman's work in a cultural economy that leads to a life fraught with trauma, although, as we see from the examples above, a woman's work contributes significantly to the household's income. If traumatic realism is the aesthetic linked to survival then traumatic materialism is the aesthetic that demonstrates how survival involves the intersection of the two economies 'upon the woman's body and its many labours'. In order to foreground this intersection an ordinary realism would not suffice, and hence the amplification of realism, as demonstrated above, is essential. I further propose that traumatic materialism forces us to pay attention to the manner in which the cultural economy's devaluation of the labour is a hidden condition, proceeding from a history of social prejudice regarding caste and gender, under the abuse and corporeal trauma that realism conveys.

## **Conclusion: The Function of Traumatic Materialism at the Present Time**

In the foregoing analysis I have demonstrated how traumatic materialism is an aesthetic that calls for a movement beyond the eye-witnessing that traumatic realism imposes upon us, to a condition of bearing witness to something deeper, whether this is the schizophrenic nature of scenic villages (Sukirtharani) or the cultural economy that humiliates the woman's body and devalues as 'immaterial' her wage-earning labour. Eye-witnessing retains the immediacy of the event, making us physical spectators to the suffering. This is what is produced by the realist mode. But bearing witness requires something more, an aesthetic

that demands that we go beyond the immediacy of the event to the unspeakable behind it.

Rothberg has argued convincingly that traumatic realism emerges out of a demand for documentation of an 'extreme historical event'. Documentation involves, in Rothberg's scheme, (a) reference, which is an 'archive of facts and details about the event'; and (b) narrative, which involves the 'shap[ing] of those details into a coherent story' (Rothberg, 2000, p. 100). This last has to be 'documentation beyond direct reference' (Rothberg, 2000, p. 101). Later (Rothberg, 2000, p. 140), he proposes that traumatic realism

...seeks both to construct access to a previously unknowable object and to instruct an audience in how to approach that object, the stakes of traumatic realism are at once epistemological and pedagogical, or, in other words, political.

I suggest that traumatic realism actually accounts only for the 'reference' component of the documentation of historical trauma. For a coherent narrative that bears witness to deeper structures of social inequality we need an aesthetic that first capitalises on the realist to reference the corporeal suffering and trauma of caste and gendered oppression, rendering us eye-witnesses to beatings and bruised bodies; and second, forces us, through the smuggling in of, say, metaphor or cultural-economy symbols, to bear witness to structures of humiliation that transcend the setting, bodies or verifiable events. In other words, traumatic materialism builds on the realist referencing and resultant eye-witnessing (by us, the readers) of broken bodies, but pushes us through metaphor, anti-realism or indices of cultural economy to bear witness to larger wrongs that may not be overtly visible. Traumatic realism, to phrase it differently, constructs us as eye-witnesses, while its amplification, namely traumatic materialism, positions us as bearing witness.

While this examination of traumatic materialism does lay considerable weight on the rhetoric of Dalit poetry centred on bodily labour and trauma, it draws attention to an aesthetic that is founded on the material contexts but gestures to something unspeakable beyond. ('Beyond', as should be evident, is the operative word throughout this essay.) While endorsing Sharankumar Limbale's argument that Dalit literature and aesthetics are grounded in material suffering (Limbale, 2004, pp. 31–32), and agreeing in principle with Lauren Berlant's call to note the 'bodily real behind the clarity of traumatic representation' (Berlant, 2001, p. 45), I propose that to stay within the domain of the material and the bodily is

to confine and relegate Dalit poetry's aesthetics to the material alone, with little scope for anti-realism, heavy symbolism or metaphorisation. (Such a categorisation should immediately alert us to older forms of reading, in which women's fiction was deemed to deal with only hearth, home and children—that is, as being apolitical—while men's writing was about the world.) This can become a pernicious methodology whereby Dalit poetry is read only in terms of material suffering, bodily condition and the 'earthy', with flights of fancy and poetic extravagance deemed unsuitable for representing Dalit conditions. My own analysis through traumatic materialism reveals that metaphors and symbols of cultural economy within such poetry pull away from the 'merely material'. It is only when we move beyond realist treatments of bodily trauma that we can bear witness to the unspeakable lying behind and beyond this trauma. Dalit poetry, in my reading, finds even the documentary realism (much praised in accounts and reviews of Dalit writing, it must be noted) an inadequate aesthetic. An amplification of realism as traumatic materialism and metaphorisation, even when reliant on the same corporeal and material contexts or sites, is what serves the purpose of causing us to bear witness to endemic suffering. If realism enables eye-witnessing, traumatic materialism (referred to as 'beyond realism' through this article) enables bearing witness. This is the political reading called for to not only ensure our refusal to classify Dalit poetry as solely about suffering but to avoid confining it to the genre of social documentary or realism. Suffering, as the quoted poems demonstrate, produces its own metaphors, language and registers.

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