



## Postcolonial Representation of Dalit Subalternity with reference to Bengali Dalit fiction

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### Abstract:

Dalit literature being reduced to a form of trauma writing seems to be utterly limited. In order to construct a cohesive subaltern narrative, it needs to realize the amalgamation of the fragmented Dalit narrative across disparate regions. Through Bengali Dalit literature, we come across the underlying hierarchies between both the Bauri woman and the Maji family (chasha caste), of which the latter supersedes the former, even though both come under Shudra identity. Furthermore, communal violence is inflicted upon the Bangladeshi refugee family, in the likes of the Dalit community, even though they belong to the majoritarian Hindu community. Here, it is a given that Dalits are downtrodden, as it presents the dynamic of a pandit being treated as a Dalit. This furthers the notion that caste discrimination is not fixated on a particular stigmatized community; rather, it transcends Varna, as the hate towards the alienated community remains undeterminable throughout history.

**Key words:** Trauma writing, cohesive subaltern narrative, Bengali Dalit literature, alienated community, undeterminable.

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Dalit literature being a post-Independent literary phenomenon symbolizes a long history of the struggle of the depressed classes against the caste hierarchy, with “the sole purpose of liberation of all Dalits” (Nayar 237), as was evident in the writings of Bama and Mahasweta Devi. With a greater emphasis added upon the Dalit texts that increasingly focused upon the political representations of atrocity and suffering in the form of personal memoirs, whilst emerging from a plethora of regional languages, there was a gradual macrocosmic shift of these marginalized discourses towards the schemata of universal human rights movement in the context of postcolonial India.

In 1992, with the English translation of the anthology of Dalit writings in Arjun Dangle’s Poisoned Bread, all the genres relating to Marathi Dalit literature-poetry, short stories, essays, and autobiographical excerpts was made available for the mass readership. Here, the English translation of post-colonial texts is further stressed upon by the Third Space Enunciation by Homi K. Bhabha, so as to understand the ambivalent space of cultural identity (Singha and Acharya Introduction). However, it must be noted that the Marathi and Tamil texts such as Bama’s Karukku and Sangati, seemingly constitute the entirety of the Dalit discourse, leaving out the other vernacular literature in utter obscurity.

On the other hand, the aforementioned generic motive of Dalit literature can be contradicted on the basis of the following two quotes: Sharankumar Limbale states “Dalit

literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief'; whereas Arjun Dangle's definition of Dalit literature is "one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India....It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus, finally ending as revolutionary". This conforms to some sort of a paradigmatic causality pattern of oppression and protest, wherein the Dalit narrative centers on 'trauma writing', resulting as a consequence of standing witness to the repudiation of human rights to the point of utter abjection, usually manifested in "the form of collective memories and experiences" (Nayar 239). This can be paralleled to Jameson's argument in Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism, wherein all Third World texts were strictly categorized in the form of postcolonial inquiry. Nonetheless, Dalit literature cannot be randomly subjected as mere personal accounts and experiences of social oppression in a similar manner.

Furthermore, by delving into the national-local discourse, one may note that a cohesive subaltern narrative can only be ushered in through the amalgamation of the fragmented Dalit literature across disparate regions, in order to "write history from below to affect the elitist nature of the nationalist agenda". Here, it can be noted that the creation of a parallel history through the documentation of "the personal narratives of Dalit literature", as can be seen in the works of Om Prakash Balmiki, Bama, Sivakami, etc., is in dire opposition to the hegemonic cultural history of the nation. In this essay, I intend to show in the context of Sujata (1959), Sea of Poppies and two other Bangla Dalit fictional stories, the perpetual sense of caste identity is still existent in the framework of overseas diaspora, of which contempt emerging in relation to caste stratification sometimes takes the form of passive social prejudice bordering upon mob violence and

absurdity, that overlaps the contours of inter-religious and national conflict, thus, resulting in the existential crisis of the Dalit. Furthermore, Ambedkar's emphasis on political Dalit individuality ultimately leads towards the blurring of the correlation between caste and varna, such that the condemned community is variable throughout the various courses of history.

In Sea of Poppies (2008), Ghosh emphasizes upon the trajectory of Deeti's forfeiting her identity as a high-caste Hindu woman, the dissolution of her high-strung identity during the migratory exploits and the eventual recovery of her caste towards the end, in relation to the larger context of "plantation diaspora" (Singh 47) in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. This points out the fact that even though "the traditional caste hierarchy" (Singh 47) seemed to be lost in the migratory process, yet it lingered as a different trait, till it was reconciled as Deeti being the high-caste wife of Hukum Singh, rather than a Chamari<sup>2</sup>, in the conclusion. In the specific instance where she escapes with Kalua for failing to commit Sati, amidst the company of the girmitiyas<sup>1</sup> upon the Ibis, apparently there still seems to be a gradual assumption of command over her fellow workers, unconditionally on her part. Even so, her way of introducing herself and Kalua as Chamars<sup>2</sup> to the workers onboard the Ibis, rather than disguising both of them under the titles of a higher caste seems to suggest the fact that under no circumstances is there a rational way to achieve social mobility. Ghosh seemingly eludes the severity of this statement by delving towards an anthropological framework wherein it is implied that with the several toiling years of disgracing abuse, the workers have simply accepted their downtrodden position in respect to 'the naturalness of the caste hierarchy'. While this may prove to be a cynical ground upon which this argument is established, Ghosh leaves out no options for them with a subtle reference that they

would have risked death in the name of honour-killing, further indicating the manic extent to which the orthodoxy of the upper-castes can go to, just for the sake of the preservation of blood. In addition to it, there is a gradual transition of Deeti's high caste Hindu identity unto a distinctive form of leadership role upon the ship, even when she is disguised as a Chamar<sup>2</sup>, inadvertently implying that leadership comes 'naturally' to the high-caste individual, of which the lower-castes are devoid of. This is evident in her warning to Kalua, "Don't you dare do it again, or you'll find your liver on the wrong side of your belly" (Ghosh 244). However, there appears to be a gradual dissolution of caste differentiation contributing to a refreshing spirit of solidarity, as seen in her persuasive speech to her "jahaji-bhai"<sup>3</sup> (Ghosh 356), due a lack of collective response against the unresponsiveness of the overseers,

Why are you all so quiet now? You were making enough noise a few minutes ago. Come on! Let's see if we can rattle the masts on this ship; let's see how long they can ignore us. (Ghosh 472)

While their emigration to Mauritius as a utopian destination upon their Mai-baap Ibis<sup>4</sup> represents a voluntary consent of will within the framework of indentured slave labour, it nevertheless draws us towards a conflicting position where the caste system is still subtly ingrained as a social status marker in a new homeland, even though occupational distinction on the basis of caste doesn't make sense anymore, since everyone onboard the schooner is bound to be engaged in manual labor in the plantations. This can be elucidated by the fact that even after the symbolic "loss of caste" (Singh 54) by crossing the kalapani<sup>5</sup>, Deeti is shown to be confronted with a perpetual sense of guilt for running off with Kalua, an untouchable. This is further supported by Ghosh's authorial comment upon the perpetuating conception of caste, "While many would choose to recast their origins, inventing grand and fanciful lineages for

themselves, there would always remain a few who clung steadfastly to the truth.” (Ghosh 284-285)

With the investigation of one of the short stories in a Bangla Dalit fiction anthology, viz., Dhani Bauri Ganga Pelo<sup>6</sup> by Sunil Kumar Das, it can be observed that even though the titular character was invited to be a part of Gopalda’s household rather than being indulged into another sanga<sup>7</sup>, it was solely due to the primary interest of including her monthly salary into the family’s funds. Even so, the prejudice in relation her low-born status is indicated by Gopal Maji’s statement, “No, you should not give money to others without my consent”. This carries along the sentiment that just because she is a Bauri<sup>8</sup> and a woman, she is incapable of making monetary decisions on her own accord and it is simply ‘unnatural’ for a woman to earn more than a man. Moreover, the underlying hypocrisy is made much more apparent by the fact that even though the Maji family was of chasha<sup>9</sup> caste, which came under the Shudra identity, there is a conscious discriminatory practice of not allowing her to enter the kitchen, even under emergency situations, such as offering water to the thirsty Hiru’s child while no one was around. This is evident in her being rebuked in the following instance,

You should have waited till my return. Now I have to wash all the utensils in my kitchen for the second time. I’ll have to discard the pitcher as well. You’ve unnecessarily given me lots of trouble. (Das 151)

This propounds the denial of her being a socially recognized supporting family member. In addition to it, Hiru’s relief upon Dhani Masi’s sraddha<sup>10</sup> ceremony, that ‘he has shouldered his responsibility to perfection, and finally finds peace within himself’, lends itself to the

contradiction of whether after all this time, such a sympathizing family member had often felt pangs of guilt for 'housing an untouchable'. This signifies a form of passive social conditioning, brought about by the hegemonic caste traditions often leaning towards prejudicial absurdity. This is projected in *Anya Ihudi*<sup>11</sup> by Kapil Krishna Thakur, whereby the inter-religious conflict in the case of Bangladeshi refugees overlaps the contours of untouchability, as seen in Brajabasi's consoling reply to the synonymous slangs of Banglu<sup>12</sup> and 'creature' directed at his 'refugee pandit' uncle,

Don't be afraid, uncle. When drunk, people do such mischief. But these young men don't disturb us. After all, they are not Muslims. They are from decent families. (Thakur 88)

This depicts the fact that even if they fall under the "majoritarian Hindu community", they are subjected to inhuman treatment, in the likes of the Dalit community, which leads up to another deriding conception that it is a given that Dalits ought to be treated with prejudicial contempt and alienation. Subsequently, this paves the way for an interesting dynamic for a pandit to be treated as a Dalit, proliferating upon the basis that the tradition of caste discrimination is not relatively fixated on a particular stigmatized community; rather, the vehemence of communal violence transcends cultural and even religious barriers, as is evident in the instance where "the frenzied, drunken members of the so-called decent families drag his daughter to 'the darkness' on the other side of the railway line" (Thakur 89), while his lament, "Tell me, you tell me....where is our real home?" (Thakur 90) drowns out in a horrifying silence.

The characterization of the subaltern and ostracized woman is vividly detailed in the 1959 film, *Sujata*, wherein the titular character's self-imposed silence emerging from her marginalized existence embellishes her within a conflicting narrative of being "a Brahmin among

untouchables (ascribed caste), and yet an untouchable among Brahmins (her adoptive family)”. The consequent alienation due to her low-born lineage is made apparent by her adoptive mother’s addressing her as ‘she is like my daughter’, in respect to the Indian social codes within a bourgeois framework. This subtly stresses the need to uplift her acchut<sup>13</sup> identity through the identification with her sister, amidst the facade of affection and love in the family. Ironically, even though the subaltern silence of Sujata opens up the possibility for social mobility of the lower castes, it is subsequently undermined by the fact that the only way for her eventual social acceptance was solely possible due to the successful blood transfusion (matching blood types) with the adoptive mother. So, even though it serves as a cathartic incident that blurs the definition of ‘pollution of blood’, it ultimately lends credence to the belief that the rupture in the caste structure was purely coincidental, thus, reinforcing the concept of caste distinctions even more than before. Furthermore, in this context of envisioning an egalitarian society, the film’s patronizing of Gandhi’s traditional stance of equality of all varnas, can be rightfully put in opposition with Ambedkar’s emphasis on legal and political Dalit individuality, which ‘demands’ equality on both economic and social grounds by its own right.

Lawrence Venuti, a prominent translation theorist, terms ‘minority’ as

the nations and social groups that are affiliated with the non-standard and non-canonical languages and literature, the politically weak or underrepresented, the colonized and the disenfranchised, the exploited and the stigmatized (G.K Das Preface).

In relation to this, it may be said that even though both Bangla and Northeast Tribal Literature have emerged as a recent phenomenon in the face of “the multi-lingual and multi-



ethnic mosaic in India” (Singha and Acharya Introduction), nevertheless, it is in fact, a natural outcome of a series of reticent caste-based oppression in Eastern India. With the increasing undertakings of ‘writing from the margins’ in the East, it is blatantly posited with the fact that its still mired in neglect, even within the body of Indian subaltern literature. While many may claim that caste stratification occurs at a lesser scale than in the states of Tamil Nadu and Punjab (Sarangi 11), it does not necessarily justify the fact that the Eastern marginal literature be denied a substantial inclusion out of the English translation of the elitist body of Dalit literature. This can be seen in the anonymity of the dialectic works of contemporary Dalit Bengali and Assamese writers, such as Kalyani Thakur Charal’s Manohar Mouli Biswas and Dhrubajyoti Borah’s Tejor Endhar. Thus, for the actual realization of the literary emancipation of Dalits, there ought to be a militant aspect inflicted upon the Dalits alongside its social narrative, as was evident in the mob treatment of Bishtu pandit as a Dalit, furthering an interesting dynamic that maybe caste hierarchy as a social conception is not completely dependent upon the varna system, but is variable to the prejudicial contempt and hate subjected towards an alienated community, that is determinable throughout the shifting narratives of history.

### **Glossary/Notes**

- Girmityas- The indentured labourers who went to work on overseas plantation colonies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their names entered on ‘girmits’ (agreements written on pieces of paper).
- Chamar- Leather workers caste.
- Jahaji-bhai- Brotherhood forged during the journey.

- Mai-baap Ibis- The schooner as an equal microcosmic residence, which has become a collective family now, regardless of caste barriers.
- Kalapani- Dark ocean.
- Dhani Bauri Ganga Pelo- Dhani Bauri gets ‘salvation’.
- Sanga- Second marriage.
- Bauri- Untouchable caste in south-western part of Bengal.
- Chasha- Farmer caste.
- Sraddha- Hindu ritual performed for the deceased.
- Anya Ihudi- The Other Jew.
- Banglu- A slang term used for the evicted Bangladeshi immigrants, residing in West Bengal.
- Acchut- Untouchable.

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