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The Construction of Namasudra Cultural Identity in the Fiction of Kapil Krishna Thakur and Brajen Mallick

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Abstract:

The aim of the paper is to study the strategies of identity formation of the Bangla Dalit writers in/through their fiction. The paper will focus on the novel *Ujantolir Upokatha* by Kapil Krishna Thakur which depicts the world of the Bangla Dalit people and also attempts to create an alternate narrative of their history. *Kalar Mandash* by Brajen Mallick is a fictionalized Biography of Kamini Sundari Gayen who was a Rayani singer, a folk artist. Her struggle as a child widow presents the Dalit world through a woman's perspective. When Dalits theorize on the idea of 'difference' they also suggest that the difference is based on perception and has been manufactured by the dominant through continued exclusion of the Dalit for centuries. The Dalits' peripheral status was enforced and maintained through violence and ideological brain washing. Thus the Dalit re-conceptualizes their 'difference' to be an artificial construct and not 'natural' as has been theorized by the dominant group.

Keywords:

Identity formation, Dalits, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Brajen Mallick, Bangla Dalit Writers, Community, Womanhood

The aim of the paper is to study the strategies of identity formation of the Bangla Dalit writers in/through their fiction. Writing is a means to negotiate a space for themselves within Bengal history. The paper will focus on the novel *Ujantolir Upokatha* by Kapil Krishna Thakur which depicts the world of the Bangla Dalit people and also attempts to create an alternate narrative of their history. The novel *Ujantolir Upokatha* depicts the life and times of a young boy Kajol. Through Kajol, the writer delineates the history, struggle and triumphs of the Namasudra people in pre-Partition East-Bengal. In a similar fashion *Kalar Mandash* by Brajen Mallick is a fictionalized Biography of Kamini Sundari Gayen who was a Rayani singer, a folk artist. Her struggle as a child widow presents the Dalit world through a woman's perspective.

The novels present us with an insight into the intricacies of the Dalit social structure and the innovative strategies adopted by them to counteract the hegemony of the 'upper castes'. The detailed depiction of the Dalit life world and life experiences in pre-Partition East Bengal signify the need of the Dalit Namasudra Diaspora to keep alive its history and traditions. This past is very much part of the selfhood of the Namasudra writers and people. The novelist acts as a recorder of Namasudra history.

The Dalit Self and the Community

The self that the Dalit writers construct in their novels create awareness about their positive attributes and erase misconceptions regarding them. The Dalit individual and community as depicted in these novels create new images of the Dalit to contest the stereotypes present in the public domain. It is a self that is constructed as a positive

alternative to the self-abnegating image proffered by the 'upper caste' to the Dalits as their suitable self-image. This new self re-constitutes the given of Dalithood to create an independent, individual being. It is a self that takes pride in its honesty, courage and skill. This self has a sense of history of the community and the discrimination they were subjected to and critiques images that re-iterate and reify the given stereotypes of the Dalit. The self as a rebel breaks all the old moulds and re-fashions itself. In this refashioning it reflects the pioneering spirit of their ancestors. Their ancestors reclaimed the marshy lands and the present generation attempts to cleanse the negative imputations from the term Dalit and reclaim it as their own. Their ancestors created a physical and cultural space which they called their own, the Bangla Dalit writers attempt to create a space and identity of their own in the literary domain. The literary space mirrors and also interacts with other domains of human activity. The public and private spheres, the past, present and future all coalesce and merge in the literary space. The literary space is used by the Dalit writers for political and polemical use.

The Bangla Dalit writer uses a colloquial idiom to mark it as the language of the Dalit. For instance, Samarendra Baidya's *Pitrigan* resonates with the raw energy of the characters and their idiom. It is significant that Baidya locates his novel in the bil areas of Faridpur district and painstakingly documents the rigour and expertise required to make these areas habitable. K. K. Thakur too in *Ujantolir Upokatha* documents the history of the Namasudra settlement of the bil areas. These novels contribute to and enrich the archive of Namasudra history. The Dalit individual and his/her close ties with the community clearly illustrates the difference between the Dalit and the Brahman protagonists.

Ujantolir Upokatha by K. K. Thakur claims to be the story of a community and not of an individual. The novel aims to celebrate the heroes of the community and represent the rich cultural heritage of the Dalit Namasudras. The authorial note at the end of the novel states that he accessed the unwritten history of the community through its collective memory by interacting with the old people and incorporating their life experiences into his narrative. Many characters in the novel are modelled on the well-known Namasudra figures. The novel captures the community through the eyes of Kajal, a young boy. The narrative opens with Kajal who along with many other people is aboard a steamer that is moving westward towards India. A distraught passenger asks; "Maati tumi kaar?" – "Land, whose are you?" He answers that, "It belongs to him who inhabits it, makes it his own" (*UU*, 08). The speaker indicates that one of the reasons for the deep bond the Namasudra peasants have towards the land is due to the pioneering efforts of the Namasudras in reclaiming the bil areas in East Bengal and that history is narrated to put into perspective their bond to this area. The settlement of the bil areas forms an important part of their history. The speaker is part of the Partition related exodus from East Bengal and he remembers another exodus which had brought his forefathers to this area. This leads to the narrative of the history of the settlement of the bil areas:

This place known as Ujantoli and its surrounding villages cover an area about four hundred kilometers. Hundred and fifty years ago this area was nothing but water, jungle and darkness (*UU*, 08).

The cause of the earlier exodus is given by the speaker:

In 1793 due to permanent settlement the Zamindars became very strong. From 1777 Indigo cultivation was forced on the peasants of Bengal. The farmers of Jessore, Khulna and Nadia were specially cursed by Indigo cultivation. They revolted against the dictates of the colonial rulers. Many of these peasants were the descendants of the 'Dhali' warriors of King Pratapaditya Rai and well skilled in fighting. In the uprising at Chandpur Subol Dhali killed a white Saheb and escaped (UU, 09).

The Namasudras are projected as a martial and proud race. The retributive punishment unleashed on the villages lead to a mass exodus of these people:

One group went to south into the heart of Sunderbans; another group went toward Barishal and the islands to the south; the other group reached this place, the dense marshy area of Faridpur (UU, 10).

The old passenger recalls that when his forefathers came here the bil was a very hostile place.

The land remains submerged two-thirds of the year. You get to see land for few months. But you cannot call it 'land'. It is rotten vegetation or mud. Feet disappear into it. In this muddy mass the thorny 'Arali', 'Nal', 'Hogla' and sturdy 'Maloncho' have grown over the years

This place was so unfit for habitation that even wild boars avoided it. Without a thought my Grandfather's Grandfather Nimchan anchored his boat there. The police and the Military could not find them but that was hardly any relief. In their place they got monstrous leeches and cobras in thousands.

You cannot put your feet in the mud. To row the boat is difficult. The bamboo (logi) sinks into the mud ten to twelve feet. In the time needed to bring the bamboo back the boat returns to its former position.

But even this could not stop these people who were more stubborn than the wild boar. They searched for highland and raised it six to seven feet high by piling mud on it and there they built their home. In the cleared area they sow paddy. Till then grass seeds satiated the hunger pangs...

Once or twice a month a few people would go to the Ganj to get salt, oil and other essentials. Their link with the outside world was only this much. The old man paused for a while. This history was not unknown to Kajal. Not even that which followed (UU, 10).

But this history of the Dalits of East Bengal needs to be told and preserved for posterity on the eve of their dispersal due to Partition. This history is part of the collective memory of the Namasudra people. The passenger's oral narrative is transcribed and transformed into a written narrative in the novel by K.K.Thakur. Both the author K.K.Thakur and the character of the passenger fulfill the role of being proud descendants of the Namasudra pioneer settlers. Their aim is to retell the narrative of hardship, courage and ingenuity of the Namasudra elders. The area that they colonised was water logged:

On one side there is Chandar bil, on the other side is bil Baghia, in the north is the river Kumar, in the south is Madhumoti.

In the vast area spread in between, slowly one after another human settlements (Janpad) rise and with the promise of prosperity others too came and settled there...

Ujantoli and the fifty odd villages around it prospered and flourished on account of the blood, sweat, love and dreams of these people who were the 'untouchable' Namasudras. The 'upper-castes' used to call them 'Chandal'. Those Brahmans who used to serve these people too were looked down upon. The caste Hindus did not offer them 'Hookah'.

Excepting these, there were a couple of 'Malo', 'Dom' and 'Kumhar' homes. The kulin, Kayastha and Brahmans used to live on the high shores of the Kumar and the Madhumoti rivers. They were Naib, Gomosta, Zamindar and the government posts too were under their control.

And there were the Muslims who lived in the surrounding villages and were treated as untouchables by the caste Hindus (Abhijaat Hindus) (UU, 10-11).

The narrative gives details about the untouchable Namasudras who were skillful farmers and brave warriors, yet they were considered the 'Jal-achal' category that is the 'upper caste' did not accept water or cooked food from them. This made the Namasudras very stubborn. The unique feature of the settlements is that the Namasudra people live independently without having daily interaction with the 'upper castes' whose settlements were located on higher ground. The practice of graded discrimination among the caste and people of different religions was practised as per the dictates of Hindu religion. The professions they engage in reveal their wide range of skill and capabilities:

They practiced different professions like House-building (Gharami), Carpenter (Chutar), Blacksmith (Kamar), Barber (Paramanik), Boatman (Majhi), Tree-climber (Gatchi), Forest wood collector (Bauali), Saw Man (Karati), Singer (Gayen), Drummer (Bayen), Witch Doctor (Ojha), Medicine Man (Kabiraj) etc. Though they were divided into seven major professional groups, they remained one united community (Sangbadh Samaj). They had tremendous social discipline. They celebrated and honoured the 'pioneer' who cleared the forest... such a person was called 'Kathi Kata' (UU, 11).

The Namasudra community had a very well organized and detailed social structure and system. The community leader knew everything and was part of all important ceremonies:

The village Pradhan was called 'Shirnama'. The 'Jernama' was second in hierarchy. The 'Gram Committee' was under the Shirnama. A few 'Paras' together was known as the 'Samaj'. A few 'Samaj' together made a 'Mila'. A few 'Mila' together formed the 'Dihi' committee. In case of a serious crisis the important figures of the 'Pargana' and 'Dihi'

would meet and the decision would reach each and every household of the community (*UU*, 12).

The land of the Ujantoli has felt the presence of six generations of these people. The Namasudra people sing and celebrate the contribution of their forefathers to this land. Each and every bit of this land reminds them of their ancestors. They feel rooted to this land and consider it as their mother. The narrative delineates this world to us through the growing up years of Kajal.

In *Ujantolir Upokatha* we are told that the land of Ujantoli has felt the presence of six generations of the Namasudra people who sing and celebrate the contribution of their forefathers to this land. Each and every bit of this land reminds them of their ancestors. They feel rooted to this land and consider it as their mother. The narrative breaks stereotypes of the Dalit at every point. They are presented as clean, cultured, sincere and hard working. As a community they are progressive and united and are presented as liberal and humane. On the moral and ethical parameter they score higher than the 'upper castes'. The 'upper castes' are represented as being tied to old regressive ideologies that are highly discriminatory and repressive toward women. The Dalit women though constrained within the domestic sphere seem to share a more liberal space in comparison to their 'upper caste' counterparts. The male writer projects the Dalit woman as happy and the 'upper caste' woman as a victim.

The cultural practices of the Namasudras are delineated in great detail to reflect the close ties between the members of the caste community. For instance, in Bastu puja the men and the boys prepare the images of the crocodile and the tiger and worship them. The women and the girls come together in the month of Falgun to perform Hechda puja on the river bank. In this puja they put flowers from different plants and creepers on the twigs and worship them (*UU*, 19-20). On Srabon Sankranti they worship the snake Goddess Monosha (*UU*, 25). The women do sandhya puja every evening and occasionally the people come together for Harinaam kirtan. The Namasudras are represented as the followers of the Vaishnavite Matua sect propagated by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur and Harinaam kirtan was a popular Matua activity (*UU*, 41). The old illiterate women of the community worship Harichand and Guruchand as Gods and invoke them in times of crises (*UU*, 53). The community performs a combination of Hindu Vaishnavite and folk rituals. Bastu puja, Hechda puja and Gyasi porbo are folk rituals that are in tune with their world and way of life. In Gyasi porbo early in the morning the women make 'alpana' with powdered rice and sindoor. The children are not allowed to sleep late, the paste of neem and turmeric is put on the bodies of the children before bathing them. After bath burnt green tamarind is put on their lips and kajal made from banana leaves is put in their eyes. The children feast on 'taal shansh' that is the soft kernel of the unripe palm fruit (*UU*, 55-56). The Hindu identity of the peasants is not highlighted rather the author chooses to focus on their folk rituals to suggest their separateness from the Hindu castes. Gyasi Porbo on first day of Kartik is the folk version of the Lakshmi puja of the Hindus. In this festival the song sung is:

Eei desher Indur Bandor bahir deshe jaye

Bahir desher Lakhi Thaoron ei Deshe aye (55).

This is an invocation to the goddess Lakshmi to come to their land and the miscreant rats and monkeys to go to other lands. The Namasudra people of *Ujantolir Upokatha* are represented as participating in the Durga puja celebrations of the 'upper castes' as observers.

On the other hand, later in the novel when Kajal witnesses the ritual worship of the 'Paatbaan' that is a wooden plank of Neem on which are engraved the images of the 'Dus Avatar' he is full of reverence and wonder. The plank remains immersed in the pond for eleven months and is brought out next year in the month of Chaitra. The image has been worshipped in Nanderchand's home since his grandfather's time. The worship of 'Paatbaan' appears natural to Kajal because it was exclusively part of the Namasudra cultural domain. The goddess Durga on the other hand appears to be a fairy tale character to him.

The image of a united, cohesive, homogeneous group is the ideal. The differences that arise due to class and gender within the community are not highlighted by K.K.Thakur. For instance, the upper class Dalits had a different take on the partition of Bengal but here Bidhu Mondol is represented as supporting his lower class brethren in their anti-partition stance. K.K.Thakur plays with historical facts in his fictional depiction of the Namasudra elite. He chooses to focus on that phase of their history where the elite work to guide the 'lower caste' peasantry and the differences in their stance had not arisen. This is done to present the Dalit Namasudras as a united community.

K.K.Thakur uses a language that is a mix of Bangla with colloquial East Bengal terms. These terms might not be easily understood by present day readers he therefore offers a gloss on them, for example "Tawa" means an earthen container with fire; "Chulla" is a slopping land touching the house; "Behan" means morning and 'Ghashi' is dungcake. These words help recreate the world of the Namasudras authentically for the readers. The use of their language helps create a distinct linguistic and cultural identity for the Namasudras. The details of the various professions followed by the Namasudra peasants help illustrate the truth and efficacy of the list provided in the beginning of the novel. For instance Kajal's father primarily is a peasant but does dabble in trade and share-cropping and when the need arises he contemplates becoming a boat-man in a commercial boat.

Nalu Sardar is a lethel known for his fighting skills and muscular body, he also happens to be a loyal and trusted aide of Bidhu Mondol. Nalu is represented as a simple, honest and caring person who helps the young 'upper caste' widow Nihar when she seeks his protection. Nihar is one of the Chowdhuri family women (*UU*, 62) and Nalu is well aware of the plight of 'upper caste' widows who are often sexually exploited in their marital home and as a result either commit suicide or escape to end up as prostitutes. The novel paints a very grim picture regarding the condition of the upper caste widows and it projects the upper caste men in very poor light. In contrast Nalu Sardar and his people appear as compassionate and sympathetic toward women. According to Nihar women occupy a much lower position than the Namasudras, (*UU*, 63) Nalu calls Nihar his sister and introduces her to his wife and asks Bidhu Mondol to help Nihar. Bidhu arranges Nihar's marriage with Kuttishwar his trusted servant. Bidhu Mondol fixes the marriage date without consulting the 'Panjika', the almanac of the Hindus because no Hindu Purohit would agree to solemnise the marriage of an 'upper

caste' widow to a 'lower caste' man. Nalu asks Bidhu Mondol to conduct the wedding rituals which he does. (*UU*, 65)

The community periodically has mock practice sessions where martial skills are displayed by the men. Kajol and his friend Kishore watch the "Dhal-shorki khela" that is the practice session with the shield and spear (*UU*, 59). Through these practices the community keeps alive the memory and tradition of their martial ancestors, the Dhali warriors. The Dalit men and women are shown to occupy and function within different domains, women occupy the domestic space and men inhabit the world outside. Men are the providers while women are represented as home makers, childbearers and as the care givers. The women are shown to bond with one another over their sewing, embroidery, making kanthas etc. They are represented as being happy even when the men can spare little time for them. The Dalit girls too go to school but are married young. It is the world of 'Gunins', 'Chandsi' medicine-men, the 'Ojha' who cures snake bites etc. These people face famine and other natural calamities as a united group. They help in each other's fields as they cannot afford to hire labour.

Kalar Mandash by Brajen mallick is the story of a Dalit woman's journey to independent selfhood despite family and community resistance. The story is a fictionalized biography of Kamini Sundari Gayen, an exponent of *Rayani sangeet* from Barishal. Rayani is a folk form practiced by Dalit widows who sing and enact the *Monosha Mongol*. The *Monosha Mongol* celebrates the story of the snake Goddess Monosha and her efforts to get recognized and worshipped as a goddess by the people. In *Kalar Mandash*, Brajen Mallick takes narrative liberties with the life story of Kamini Sundari Gayen, who is the central protagonist of the novel. *Kalar Mandash* intersperses between fiction and biography. Mallick claims that he has used his imagination to flesh out the facts of Kamini's life and character and therefore the 'character' Kamini is purely his creation. Mallick weaves in elements of history of Barishal, the contemporary social scene and the impact of the freedom movement on the Dalits and the Muslims to contextualize Kamini's journey from a child widow to a Rayani singer.

Mallick draws a parallel between Monosha and Kamini's struggle for recognition and independent selfhood. The Monosha myth is re-contextualized and Kamini is represented as a modern day Monosha who fights for and gets her just place in society. The given life description of Kamini Gayen presents her story along with etching in the contemporary social life of the common people of Barishal. Mallick represents the life of the village peasants in great detail to show its influence in shaping Kamini's personality. The historical, the real and the mythic coalesce in the narrative. Mallick narrates the story of Kamini, an exemplary Dalit woman folk artist to highlight the Dalit cultural heritage of East Bengal which is now fast disappearing in West Bengal. His adherence to an aesthetic based on experiential authenticity is further substantiated by the publisher's claim that the author comes from the same socio-economic and cultural background as Kamini Gayen and therefore he is eminently suitable to authentically delineate that world for us.

The author narrates her story to highlight the achievements of a Dalit woman artist and record the facets of a bygone world for posterity. Kamini is a child widow from the Namasudra community of Barishal. The aim of the narrative is to represent through her struggles the problems of Dalit women and widows in particular. The publisher's note mentions that the author comes from the same social, economic and cultural background as Kamini Gayen and therefore he is posited as being eminently

suitable to authentically delineate that world to us. There is a felt need to do so because the Partition changed the life course and geographical location of the Namasudras. Therefore they feel the need to depict and preserve their cultural history in their narratives. The given life description of Kamini Gayen presents her story along with etching in the contemporary social life of the common people of Barishal. Mallick represents the life of the village peasants in great detail to show its influence in shaping Kamini's personality. He suggests that while Kamini might have had different experiences on account of her social and economic position from that of the 'upper caste' women, there still exist areas of commonality between them, for instance, both Dalit and Savarna homes exploit the child widow.

In the 'Introduction' to the novel *Kalar Mandash*, Mallick states that he chose to narrate the story of Kamini representing a neglected community, because he is one of them, and wants to represent their history and potential to the society at large. This indicates that the Dalit writers' sense of the self is deeply connected with his community identity. The novel becomes a means to record, represent and preserve their cultural past. The novel also forges a sense of community with other Dalit writers by including quotes from their works as chapter headings. The chapter headings are in the form of suggestive folk songs or poems that indicate the rituals of the Dalit peasants or deliberate on casteism among other topics of relevance. Mallick thus incorporates references to Dalit cultural practices and life experiences in oral and written form within his own narrative. This fosters a sense of community, of sharing and bonding within the corpus of Dalit cultural output. A similar strategy is used by K.K.Thakur in *Ujantolir Upokatha*. The Partition changed the life course and geographical location of the Namasudras. Therefore they feel the need to depict and preserve their cultural history in their narratives.

K.K.Thakur consciously tries to build a positive picture of the Namasudra self and perhaps this prompts him to tinker with history. The Namasudra community was very politically active and K.K.Thakur highlights this aspect of their social organizations and reform initiatives. He presents the Namasudra community to be totally anti-British. This is at variance with documented history. Thakur deviates from given history due to a felt need to alter the historical perspective regarding the Dalit as anti-national and pro-colonial. Thakur chooses not to focus on the Namasudra community's anti-Swadeshi and anti-Quit India movement phase. He rather presents the Namasudra as proud Nationalists who detest British policies. Brajen Mallick in *Kalar Mandash* too chooses to focus on his heroine Kamini's contribution to the Nationalist cause rather than present her as offering a Dalit critique to the elite 'upper caste' Nationalist rhetoric.

The Dalit writer does not choose to represent their community from the point of view of dominant history which represents them as anti-nation. They present a counter view that is as much valid and plausible as the dominant view. For instance, many British policies directly hurt the interest of the peasants and the writers choose to dwell on the micro level critique by the peasants than dwell on the macro level alliance of the upper class Dalits with the British that is legitimized by the dominant discourse. Thus both K.K.Thakur and Brajen Mallick present the Dalit peasant as a critic and a conscious objector to British policies. Each writer writes with the perception that they are a part of a caste community and there is a need to represent it authentically to break the stereotypes of the Dalit. The Bangla Dalit writers, thus, inscribe their self in the literary space. The Bangla Dalit writer experiments with his form and content in order

to present the lived reality of the Dalit from a new perspective. K.K.Thakur calls his novel a narrative of the people and not of any individual. Though Kajal happens to be the person through whom we see this world, he is not the 'hero' of the narrative. The focus is firmly on the community.

The portrayal of the Dalit's cultural practices, their strong sense of community bonding, their initiatives for self-improvement, their education and their sense of pride project a very positive image of the Dalit self and community. The novels present the Dalit self to be intelligent, proactive, hardy, organized and beautiful. The Dalit men and women are represented as sharing a relationship of equality, love and respect. For instance, Kamini is a model woman who shares a good rapport with the men in her family. The question that needs to be asked is that do the male writers under represent the problems of the Dalit woman? These women are often relegated to the domestic sphere. They are married off early and the onus of running the household lies on their shoulders. The women in *Ujantolir Upokatha* are shown to be happy and contented with their lot. The men are shown to be progressive and they take initiatives for widow remarriage and resist Brahmanical norms. In *Kalar Mandash* the male writer presents himself as a pro woman, nevertheless the image of Kamini is carefully constructed within the matrix of the good woman. Her image is that of a beautiful and moral woman who does not stray despite temptation. She thus deconstructs the image of the Dalit woman as sexually attractive and easily available. Kamini is represented as successfully maneuvering herself against the male gaze and the lust she confronts. She is a true heroine in the model of Sati Behula. The problem is that when Kamini tries to live up to this image she stops being a real woman. She suppresses her sexuality to conform to the dictates of the Sati trope and the male author celebrates her success but fails to represent her turmoil in trying to conform to the patriarchal image of the Sati, the good woman.

The novels present positive images of the Dalit but one has to realize that gaps remain in the delineation and construction of the Dalit woman. The Dalit male writer's patriarchal biases shine forth in the representation of contented women happy in their domestic chores. The initiatives for progress and self-respect are taken by the Dalit men. Kamini in *Kalar Mandash* does take certain initiatives toward education of girls and women but she remains constrained within the grid of the Sati and good woman syndrome. In attempting to deconstruct the stereotype of the morally ambivalent Dalit woman Kamini gets trapped into another stereotype. The point to be noted in these representations is that under the construction of the homogeneous Dalit identity that is projected by the writers there remain fissures of caste, gender, class and ideology, which contest this homogeneity of Dalit identity and reiterate its heterogeneity. The strategies of identity construction are contextualized by their spatial and ideological location. Identities are not fixed but fluid that is what these narratives and their strategies highlight.

The novels present unexplored aspects of the Dalit peasant's life. The focus is to delineate in detail their culture, their unity and their loving relationships to build a positive image of the Dalit to counter existing image of the Dalit as uncultured, dirty, divided and quarrelsome. The narratives also represent the interaction of the Dalits with the 'upper castes' and therein deconstructs the given stereotypes of the submissive Dalit vis-à-vis the assertive 'upper caste'. The 'lower caste' movements presented noticeably 'loyalist' and 'anti-nationalist' images of themselves during colonial rule but the present day Dalit writing in post-colonial times represents the Dalit as pro-national and

anti-colonial. This is the image that is projected in the novels *Ujantolir Upokatha* and *Kalar Mandash*. The spatial location of the writer and the times affect the politics and the nature of the self-image.

Bangla Dalit literature reveals to us the contours of an unequal society. The Dalit writer uses language as a carrier of caste and cultural baggage and a tool of self-definition. Their works become a vehicle to meet an emotional need for identity in a casteist society. The writer's defiance remains at an intellectual and verbal level. Behind an aggressive posture there is pain and a feeling of powerlessness and helplessness as the majority of Dalit community remains depressed, indigent and uneducated. Dalit literature gives voice to the hitherto silent majority. Some Bengali Dalit writers suggest that the future of Dalit writing is in re-visioning ones ideological positions to be inclusive and subvert an exclusionary ethos.

In their representation of the Dalit self the Bangla Dalit writers position themselves in relation to the 'Savarna' in the kind of narrative voice they adopt, the images, themes, myths they use and that recur in their texts and help counter the image of the Dalit existing in the public domain. The framework within which the Dalit was categorized and was forced to present themselves is slowly undercut in these representations. For instance in 'Savarna' narrative the Dalit is denied dignity and human status and is the object of pity. These facts about Dalit character and selfhood are contested by the Bangla Dalit writers. They present the Dalit self as an agent of change who deconstructs the 'Savarna' given. The Dalit writers counter the generalisations regarding Dalits by focusing on the individuals and their contribution to the community. The Dalit is presented as a community of individuals who are different yet united in their vision for dignity, equality and progress. The homogenized stereotype of the Dalit as the 'other' to the 'Savarna' self is countered by the Dalits. The Dalit writer constructs the dominant as the monstrous 'other' and so facilitates the entry of the Dalit into realms of humanity. The Dalits are described as idle, weak, corrupt, dirty and uncultured by the dominant. This negative image is altered and contested by the positive representations of the Dalit self in Dalit narratives. To conclude it would not be wrong to say that the Bengali Dalit writers have given new issues and themes to the corpus of Dalit writing and enriched it immensely.

Thus we see that the subaltern does not use a single strategy to identify the cultural constructs of his identity. The subaltern strategy has always been to use both the categories, that of 'difference' and of 'sameness'. That is, they simultaneously argue for a 'different' identity while at the same time positing the 'Self' as being no different and therefore similar to the dominant and on that basis demand inclusion into its privileges, prestige, and position. A politics based on difference alone would not allow for an argument of inclusion because the Dalit subaltern's basis of exclusion was based on perception of their 'difference' from the dominant group. Therefore, when Dalits theorize on the idea of 'difference' they also suggest that the difference is in perception and has been manufactured by the dominant through continued exclusion of the Dalit for centuries. The Dalits' peripheral status was enforced and maintained through violence and ideological brain washing. Thus the Dalit re-conceptualizes their 'difference' to be an artificial construct and not 'natural' as has been theorized by the dominant group. When Dalits refer to 'difference', whether cultural, social, or economic, it is coupled with an insistence that it is an imposed and constructed difference, which they need to erase.

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BIO-NOTE

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