

Myth, Symbol and Dalit Identity: An Analysis of Gautam Aali's Poem 'Asura'

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Gautam Aali belongs to the Dalit Namasudra community of Bengal. He is a poet and short story writer and is closely associated with the Bangla Dalit literary movement. He uses his writing as a means of political engagement and activism. His poetry collection is called *Choto Jater Sanglap* (2001) which means 'The Lower Caste's Monologue'. A reading of Aali's poem 'Asura' will be undertaken to study the nuances of the Dalit self he constructs. In "Asura" (CJ, 27) Aali suggests that the Dalits need to reconstruct a positive self-image by demolishing the old systems of representing them. They have to break free of the strangle hold of dominant representations that continue to view them as the 'Asura'. Aali does not create a 'new' image; he rather invests the old image of the 'demonic Asura' with heroic power and respect. He also constructs the Gods, that is, the 'Devatas' as weak, deceitful, and exploitative of the Asuras. The paper would explore Aali's use of myth and symbol to construct a positive image of the Dalit and critique the existing stereotypes

Keywords: Bangla Dalit literature; Myth; Folklore; Identity; Dominant; Reconstruction.

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deceitful, and exploitative of the Asuras. The opening lines of the poem analyses how Dalits came to acquire and adopt dominant representations of their self as authentic and true. He says:

In our childhood we would all crowd and sit on bales of hay and listen to stories,
 Stories about Rakshasas, stories about Asuras. Ravana was a Rakshasa.
 We would listen to stories about the destruction of the Rakshasha 'Vansh' (clan)
 With mouths wide open in wonder, we would listen to the story of Bakasura.
 We would listen to the story of RaktaSura.
 We would hungrily feed on the stories of the great exploits of Bhagvaan Ram,
 Of Bhagvaan Sri Krishna's use of cunning to save the Faith, 'Dharma'.
 The Rakshasas were different, they did not believe in 'Dharma'
 They were the breeding house for all that was un-Godly - 'Adharma'
 We used to get very excited listening about the Asuras conflict with 'Dharma',
 About the Rakshasa's 'Tandava', the dance of destruction.
 And finally after listening about their death and destruction we would be relieved
 'Dharma' was relieved, at peace (27).

The epics are a medium of cultural dominance. The 'lower castes' accept the moral and cultural codes propagated through these Epics without any question. The illiterate village folk have access to these narratives through 'oral' and folk versions of the same. The dominant myths are thus familiarized. The Dalit children learn about the demonized Rakshasa and Asuras through these narratives. These tales teach them to 'hate' the Rakshasa and 'worship' the Aryan Gods. These tales construct a division between 'Ram' the Aryan God and 'Ravan' the non-Aryan Rakshasa and they are represented as binary symbols of good and evil respectively. They thus construct definitive images of these individuals and their communities. These images popularized through the oral and folk renderings permeate all strata of society and captivate the popular imagination, and get accepted as the universal given.ⁱ The poet illustrates the 'power' such dominant cultural texts exert over the populace. He also emphasizes the importance of literature in disseminating ideas through 'stories' or 'narratives'. Literature thus emerges as a potent form to construct one's identity and register protest. He suggests that accepting the dominant, Aryan rhetoric about the Rakshasa would be detrimental to Dalit selfhood. This realization is dramatically presented in the form of the poet's self-realization that he too is an 'Asura':

Breathing in relief as I stand on the threshold of
 The twenty first century and view my reflection in the mirror, I get a shock.
 The blood of the Asuras is in my body!
 The ugliness of the Rakshasa is in my body!
 For so long I have been happy and joyous at my own death! (27)

Education allows the poet to see through the strategies of the dominant narratives, and their creation of a negative 'other' in the form of the Dalit Asura. The perception regarding the Dalit-

Asura has not changed much is suggested by his digressive account of his Savarna colleague's reaction to his awakened self-consciousness:

My Colleague, a comrade of great stature, said the other day.
 Your head seems to be going awry.
 Your speech or talk seems inconsistent, incoherent, irrelevant.
 You should consult a good psychiatrist (27).

The discomfiture of the Savarna at Dalit self-assertion is apparent. And it is historicized through the legend of Shambuk's rebellion and the punishment meted out to him by the Brahman God Ram. Aali further links it to the punishment meted out to his grandfather for having tried to educate his son. The attempt fails but it is significant because it makes the poet's father to re-engage in a similar attempt and this time he succeeds in educating his son, the poet. The poet thus is a first generation literate. He says that he wants to write the 'truth' about this world and when he does that he is branded as 'mad' and irrational. The birth of Dalit self consciousness and the presumed demand for 'rights' elicits Savarna scorn. The aware and assertive Dalits are branded as 'mad' and their 'just' demands are represented as irrelevant and arising out of a swollen, bad, or 'rotten' head. Thus, Dalit aspiration gets represented as transgression. Through the image of the 'rotten head' he suggests that the Dalit desire to rise above their social station is figured by the Savarnas as a symptom of madness or as a sign of their limited aptitude that makes them have no sense of social balance or hierarchy. The 'upper caste' demand is that Dalits should conform to the prescribed social codes and not question them. When Dalits refuse to do so and start to think and behave as independent beings, they are branded as mad. With the birth of self consciousness the attempt to fashion a new, independent, autonomous self begins.

Aali in "Asura" explores the paradoxes that riddle the Dalit self. For instance, Dalits accept the dominant representation of the 'Rakshas' because they perceive them as being 'different' from their 'self' and as the 'other'. The Dalits do not differentiate between themselves and the 'Savarnas' because they share physical and cultural traits with the dominant castes. The sanskritisation of the Dalit has lead to erasure of cultural differences between these groups and has strengthened the perception that they are 'same' but treated differently. Aali suggests that differences do exist but they are not rightly understood by the Dalits because of the cultural dominance of the Savarna. The Dalits believe that they are Hindu and celebrate the Asura's death and defeat without realizing that the 'Asura' is the symbolic Dalit being defeated by the Aryan Gods. He suggests that the old myths and legends need to be re-interpreted by the Dalits. He attempts to do so in the poem to educate the Dalits about the politics of 'difference'. Aali is well aware of the problems that beset the construction of Dalit 'difference'. He ironically says:

Removing paddy husk, singing songs of Shiva!
 What to do brother my head has really gone bad (28).

The Dalit peasant sings songs of Shiva without being aware of the power politics hidden in the God's image. The poet ironically suggests that he sings "songs of Shiva", the Hindu God whose consort Durga/Chandi slayed various Asuras, because he is mad. Presumably, only a mad person would celebrate the destroyer of his own clan and community. Through the image of Shiva, Aali

manages to convey the adoption of a Hindu identity by the Dalits and the need to critique this blind following or Savarna religion and culture by them. Through Shiva's image the poet represents the history of Aryan dominance and appropriation. The possible re-appropriation of the Dalit self through the same image is hinted at by his reference to the Indus Valley people as the ancestors of the Dalit. The poet assumes that the reader will be able to make the connection between 'Pashupati' the god of the Harrapan people and 'Shiva'. Aryans appropriated 'Pashupati' and called him 'Shiva'. The poet suggests that the Dalits celebration of 'Shiva' needs to be re-contextualised in terms of their lost culture. Shiva thus becomes an image of re-claiming their lost history and culture. The Dalits have to re appropriate their Gods.

The Dalit poet is an example of ironic self insight. The dominant cultural hegemony over Dalits in Bengal is quite evident. This poem illustrates the deep penetration of dominant cultural practices among the Dalits and the need to appropriate them for Dalit identity construction. This may be one of the reasons why in Bengal the 'lower caste' groups did not construct an anti-Hindu identity for themselves during the colonial period. These paradoxes of the Dalit self in Bengal form the context of Aali's irony in the poems. In Bengal there is no clear cut difference between the physical appearance of the 'upper castes' and the Dalits. Yet, in 'Asura' Aali constructs it as a clear 'difference', where the Dalit resembles the mythical Asura, and is racially a non-Aryan, and the 'upper caste' resembles the Gods and is an Aryan. The 'racial' 'difference' is also contextualized within their socio-economic background in the present times. He states, that the majority of Dalits live by hard labour and therefore have muscular bodies like those of the Asuras. Whereas, the 'upper caste' Bhadralok have long removed themselves from these activities and live off Dalit labour. They therefore resemble the smooth bodied Gods. The 'sameness,' or shared cultural space and physical resemblances between the two groups thus get constructed to signify dominant hegemony and cultural colonization of the Dalit. He cites the 'history' of the Aryan destruction of the Indus valley people to contextualize the 'difference' represented in the myths and to historicise Dalit's ignorance and backwardness. He represents it as a product of the power politics of the victor race over the defeated one. He celebrates Dalit 'difference' to craft a distinct identity for them. He asks:

Asura, meaning? One who has no 'sur', Sur meaning? Rhythm
That is, people without rhythm or rhyme
Meaning those people who do not belong
To the party of the 'Dharmaputras' or the Gods.
What else do I understand by the term 'Asur'?
A strong human almost naked, wild or village bumpkinish
Who does not possess the 'A' of education. And he who has no education,
We do not give any credence to that person's mind or intelligence.
Do uneducated people deserve minds? (29)

The given images of the 'Asura' appear to corroborate 'Savarna' ideas of the Dalit as being uncultured, irrational (without rhythm), and unlettered. The intended meaning of 'A-sur' as the

rebel becomes clear when he calls Ambedkar a 'Sur' breaker, rhythm breaker 'Asura'. In his rebellion against the given norms Ambedkar is comparable to Shambuk. He says:

We know about another Asura.
 Against whom all the Gods of the country, Brahma's progeny,
 Unitedly, have been fighting.
 They could not chop off his head like Shambuk's at the right moment
 He got educated and announced the rebellion. He will conquer heaven.
 He wants to break the music, rhythm and rhyme of the old social orchestra
 You might have heard about this 'sur' breaker - rhythm breaker Asura.
 If not you will hear about him in the future.
 Like Raktasura he has sowed the blood seed (Raktabeej)
 The destruction of these 'Raktabeej' has begun all over India.
 The God's party is trying if they can destroy this Asura's clan
 Would you like to hear this Asura's name?
 While you get cleansed through chanting mantras-
 He is Ambedkar (29).

Ambedkar represents the successful Asura who sowed the seed of Dalit rebellion. The poet echoes Ambedkar and says,

I a worthless person, here declare unto you.
 Born into the Asura clan, I exist only for the Asuras (29).

He envisages the poet's role as being that of a leader of the community. He draws parallels between Dalit demands for equality and the Asura's demand for 'Amrit' to link the mythic and legendary with the present reality. Significantly, the dominant response to Dalit/ Asura demands has been to brand those as unjustified and unmerited:

Look at these Asura's capricious demands!
 Their cherished desire is to be like Gods
 The sea was churned by both, the Devatas and the Asuras!
 You have toiled a bit so what?
 On account of that you want to claim your share of the 'Amrit'?
 What a mind! Wants 'Amrit' (nectar)! Wants to be like the Gods!
 Arrey Baba, you don't get nectar with such thick heads,
 You need a bit of education too.
 Do you have it?
 Did you get to taste the Amrit? Shucks! Too bad! (30)

The Savarna or dominant society make fun of the Dalit's disabilities and gleefully rejoice at their own cleverness. The cheating of the Asura's by the Gods during the 'Samudra manthan' is given a modern context by the poet. He asks:

Look at our skin colour, our muscular strength, just like an Asura.

We resemble the Asuras created in the Dharmagranks.
 We are the ones who grow the food.
 And those who lazily wait near the snake's tail and snatch away the nectar –
 They are just like the Gods. They drink the nectar we create,

 And we? Eat little, or go hungry, suffer illness, drink arrack, and get drunk.
 The poison from the sea-churning we drink and keep on getting destroyed.
 We gradually move toward perdition.
 How long will this fight for nectar continue? For ever? (30)

As if in response to the 'Asura' query the Savarna 'voice' says:

Look at the rotten mindedness of the Asuras!
 Besides eating and drinking they can think of no work,
 Except to conquer heaven! Arre, Baba, to go to heaven you need a vehicle, a 'vahan' (31).

He demystifies the myths by scrutinizing them through a rational and practical perspective. He questions the dominant construction regarding the Asura's capabilities and means and asks how they managed to "attack" heaven without any "vahan". These facts have been recorded in the 'Dharmagranks', therefore he says they cannot be false. The Dalit poet then begins to rationally deconstruct the mythic content. He says, "then, did heaven exist somewhere outside heaven?/ Meaning on this earth? Meaning in this Bharat Varsh?" (31). Taking the argument further he suggests that both the Gods and the Asuras resided here and continue to do so. He uses history to explain the origins of these myths. Ironically, the 'history' he quotes too, is written by the dominant group. The Dalit poet therefore has to sift the truth out:

What does history say? History meaning; the history that is fed to us
 The original inhabitants of this country were non-Aryans, just ponder a bit;
 Non-Aryans, Can you see the poison inside the language?
 Just add an 'A' before 'Sura' to make it A-sura, similarly prefix a non to Aryan to make non-Aryan.
 Does not the word mean unwanted unloved? Connote something small, low, mixed with hate?
 The fact is the original inhabitants were non-Aryans.
 The Aryans came from outside. They attacked this country of the non-Aryans (31-32).

The dominant representation of history has erased the contribution of the original inhabitants of the land. The Dalit poet attempts to reclaim their history. The original inhabitants are represented to be the people of the Indus valley civilization. The poet thus constructs a proud lineage and past for the Dalits and posits them as more advanced than the Aryan invaders. He constructs the Dalit identity based on facts already existing in the historical texts. He uses history to defamiliarise the mythic and to read the Gods and the Asuras in the context of the Savarna and the Dalit divide.

Uncivilized Jati-who are these? Non-Aryans?
 Come let us again turn the leaves of history.
 You know about the Sindhu Civilization, the story of Harappa and Mohenjodaro.
 What does this civilization of the Indian sub-continent document?
 It speaks about the highly developed state of the people of this country.
 The marauding attacking Aryan outsiders did not possess it.
 These hopeless non-Aryans did possess those capabilities - That is the capacity to write,
 Yes- they could write. Their script etched on stone is proof of that.
 What is written on that stone?
 We do not know, having reached the zenith of the present civilization,
 We still cannot read their writing.
 Why can't we? Because of those civilized Aryans.
 They destroyed our tradition, our history.

The descendants of the once educated,
 Have been made uneducated, uncivilized, barbarian.
 Just so,
 The English invaders chopped off the thumbs of the muslin workers of Bengal (32).

Thus, the 'God's are those who have power and the 'Asuras' are those who have none. The Dalit poet suggests that the real 'Asuras' or 'evil' persons are the Aryan- 'upper castes' who have represented themselves as Gods and exploited the Non-Aryan Dalits. He says:

Uncivilized Jati - who? No, not the non-Aryans? But the so called Aryans.
 The so called upper castes of a blue blooded society.
 Selfish people, who destroyed the culture of this country, created the caste system,
 Powered by the fire (spirit) of Brahma, these self declared gods
 Made the original inhabitants of this land their 'Vahans'.
 Just like domesticated animals we carry these God-greedy humans.
 These uncivilized humans wear the badge of civilization and hate other humans.
 Why shall they not be hated? (33)

He further deconstructs the idea of the Gods and says that they cannot move without the help of their 'vahans' and therefore it means that they, meaning 'the Gods', have no running power of their own. They have to move by taking support, by holding on to the Asuras. He then puts this in the context of the contemporary situation:

Of the eighty five percent people of this country, you and I are one.
 All the resources of this country are produced by you, and I.
 The origins of all the power of this country are you and I.
 In whose hands rests all the power of this country? Fifteen percent people hold it.
 Who consumes all the resources of the country? Fifteen percent people do.
 Who are these fifteen percent? The upper caste people of society.
 Who are these upper-castes? Aryan descendants. Who are Aryans? Outsider attackers.

Whose 'Vahan' are you and I? Of the Aryans (33).

The construction of a positive Dalit identity is done by negating the 'given' identity and 'texts' of the Savarna society. The rational, practical perspective is used to critically undermine the Purusha myth that is the mainstay of the caste system. The resonant self assertion of the Asura /Dalit-poet is one of protest:

If the non-Aryans refuse to be their vehicles?
If they shake off the Devtas (Gods) from their backs?
What will happen to these evil handicapped, scheming Devatas?
.....
Why will not the term Asura change hands?
Why should we not return the weapon created by them?
Can we not do it? Can we not keep aside the skin and scream loudly –
In this country's Ocean of casteism I too am one,
Power greedy outsider barbarian people's created badge is on my body.
I too am an Asura, strong, potent, freedom loving,
Great in humanism, 'sangrami' revolutionary.
I am the Asura's protesting descendant.
Our declared self identity is the vehicle of our excellence, greatness (34).

In this poem Aali tries to make his audience and readers understand the need to critically re-imagine the Dalit self. The poem is premised on the discourses popularized by the 'lower caste' 'Adi' movements and their re-reading of 'history' that constructed a non-Aryan, aboriginal identity for the Dalits and represented the 'upper castes' as 'invaders' and 'outsiders'. The poet suggests that there is a need to overthrow the derogatory dominant narratives regarding the Dalits and replace them with Dalit self narratives that will presumably present the authentic Dalit self. This project can be made possible through education as 'knowledge' leads to self-realisation and re-cognition of the Dalit self. Aali illustrates this through his own self experience. He moves from celebrating the Aryan subjugation of his self and community to questioning those narratives. His initial condition is emblematic of most Dalits who follow the dominant ideology blindly. The Epics depict the Dalit's fight for their rights and selfhood as unmerited and unjustified aspiration. The mythological parallel to the modern Dalit aspiration is Shambuk because he transgressed the set boundaries for the 'lower castes'. The Epic represents him as an overreacher. The Dalit poet represents him not as a transgressive but as one who transcends the imitations set by a hostile society and is therefore heroic. Thus, the transgressive 'mad' man is represented as heroic and celebrated. He represents his aspiring family as comprising of such 'mad' persons.

The poet suggests that 'Savarna' discomfort and resistance to Dalit independence makes them brand the interrogating and independent Dalit as 'mad' to undermine them as irrational and illegitimate. The Dalit poet asks uncomfortable questions and represents a 'different' 'truth'

than the one projected by dominant 'history' and the 'myths'. He offers the 'voice' of lived experience against the constructed mythologies of Dalit subjugation and submissiveness. The expression of Dalit subjectivity and autonomy threatens dominant spaces and therefore they brand it as unhealthy and 'madness'. This helps to curtail it and render it ineffective. The poet ironically suggests that the truly mad and irrational Dalit can be used by the 'Savarna' society but the 'rational' Dalit is an impediment and useless. Therefore, the Savarna tendency is to call the 'rational' Dalit 'mad'. The poet constructs 'madness' as subversive and transgressive. He suggests that Dalits need to challenge received or given notions about their 'self', about what is good and evil, about the prescribed boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate actions and aspirations allowed the Dalit.

Conclusion

Aali thus attempts to create a counter discourse of the Dalit self through ideas of rationality, equality, knowledge, and self-respect. He re-interprets the myths to reveal how those in power always cheat the ignorant of the fruits of their labour. He catalogues the violence that the Dalit Asuras had had to suffer on their 'mind' and 'body' to inspire the Dalits to revolt against its perpetuation in contemporary times. To thwart the dominant forces the Dalits need to unite. The poet acknowledges that there are internal divisions within the Dalits and they have to overcome those to unite and create a new Dalit identity and truth. To reshape the Dalit identity they have to re-define themselves and their relationship to the Savarna society. The poet renames the Savarna as 'Asura' because they best represent the negativity that they have invested the Asura to symbolically signify. The Asura as 'Dalit' represents all that is heroic and good. The Gods are represented as handicapped and dependent on the Asuras. He reverses the 'civilized' and 'barbarian' paradigms to construct a new image of the Dalit and the Savarna.

1. Thus, the 'folk' too is mediated or affected by dominant narratives and cannot be taken as an autonomous Dalit/Tribal Domain. Aali does not speak about or explore the folk narratives that are subversive. He appropriates that role for the Dalit writer and poet.

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BIO-NOTE

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