

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

VOL: 10, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2020

REFREED, INDEXED, BLIND PEER REVIEWED

About Us: <http://pintersociety.com/about/>

Editorial Board: <http://pintersociety.com/editorial-board/>

Submission Guidelines: <http://pintersociety.com/submission-guidelines/>

Call for Papers: <http://pintersociety.com/call-for-papers/>

All Open Access articles published by LLILJ are available online, with free access, under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial License as listed on <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Individual users are allowed non-commercial re-use, sharing and reproduction of the content in any medium, with proper citation of the original publication in LLILJ. For commercial re-use or republication permission, please contact lapislazulijournal@gmail.com

The Dalit Peasant's Struggle for Self and Community in Jatin Bala's Short Stories

Brati Biswas

Abstract:

Jatin Bala was born in a peasant family. He spent his early years in different refugee camps. He served as a Block youth officer of the state government for thirty years and it brought him in close contact with the rural life of West Bengal. His familiarity with the lives of the poor Dalit villagers of West Bengal forms the crux of his narratives. His stories are about Dalit self-awakening within the specific context of caste relations in Bengal and the Dalit movement at large. The paper seeks to enquire into the matrix of politics of selfhood as they reflect in Jatin Bala's narratives of rural Bengal and the insights he offers there in.

Key Words:

Bangla Dalit, Caste, Self, Peasant, Identity.

Jatin Bala was born in 1949 in Jessore in a peasant family. He spent his early years in different refugee camps. Rootless and poor, he did various odd jobs to sustain himself. He served as a Block youth officer of the state government for thirty years and it brought him in close contact with the rural life of West Bengal. His familiarity with the lives of the poor Dalit villagers of West Bengal forms the crux of his narratives. His stories are about Dalit self-awakening within the specific context of caste relations in Bengal and the Dalit movement at large.

The story "Kranti Barta"ⁱ presents different aspects of the Dalit peasant's lives and their relation to their community and the Savarnas. Bala explores the complex nuances of the Dalit individual's relationship with his community through the Dalit protagonist Nogor Dhali. Through the story of Nogor Dhali he explores the issue of Dalit unity and solidarity vis-a-vis Brahmanic hegemony and power. He also indicates the presence of class and gender differences within the Dalit community. Nogor Dhali is a share cropper like Sudhir Mondol but Mondol is his class superior. He takes Dhali who is a daily labourer as a partner in share cropping because he knows how to repair the shallow pump used in the fields. Economic and practical considerations rather than caste bring them together. The fragile nature of Dalit unity and the successful coming together of the Brahmans in the story reflect the power wielded by the combination of caste and class in the case of the Brahmans. The Brahman's power emanates from their social and economic dominance over the Namasudra peasants. They control the rice and oil mills and occupy important positions in the local bodies. The peasants are 'Bargadar' or tenants of the Brahman's fields and thus dependent on them for their livelihood. The Brahmans use their power and cunning to silence the protesting Dalits of the 'Nomo para' and to isolate Nogor Dhali from his community. But Nogor Dhali refuses to be brow beaten and cowed down. His resistance and protest against the injustice done to him represents the birth of the new awakened Dalit individual who critiques both the Dalit and Brahman communities. This self offers a ray of hope for Dalit liberation. But this image is ambivalent as at the moment of rebellion he sees only darkness, he hopes that one day he will find light.

Nogor Dhali's sense of injustice arises out of his belief that his 'low caste' and class make it easy for the rich Brahman Shamor Sharma to sexually exploit his young and beautiful wife. The poor Dalit woman becomes an easy target during the lean season before the harvest. During this period the Dalit homes have no grain and most of them go hungry. The 'upper caste' men use their

economic power to sexually exploit the poor Dalit women. The men of the 'Nomo para' believe that their 'honour' has been compromised by the Brahman. They exclaim, "the poor man's pride (izzat) does not count. If you have money you can loot it, take advantage of poverty, hunger... but for how long will this (Julum) injustice go on?" (GB, 3).

For the Dalit men 'Phool' is a Dalit woman and as such she is regarded as a possession and an extension of their male self and pride. That is why they collectively arrive in the Brahman 'para' to challenge them. This kind of patriarchal mentality is reflected in their personal relationships too. Nogar Dhali treats Phool very badly when he finds that she has been cheating on him. Phool asks his forgiveness and says she was forced by hunger to take the Brahman lover. Dhali kicks her and sexually abuses her till his anger and frustration subside. Similarly when Banshi asks her husband Chaitanya Bala not to go after the 'thief' as she knows who it is, he kicks and curses her. The Dalit men do not consider their women as independent beings. In the heated exchange between the Dalits and the Brahmans the Namasudra male leader Banshi tells the Brahman Mahendra Rai that they are not scared of the Brahman's threatening postures. He asks him to use such postures to dominate their wives. The Dalit male refuses to equate his self with the Brahman woman and places himself at a better and more independent position than her.

An alternative interpretation of Nogar Dhali's wife 'Phool' comes from Banshi, Chaitanya Bala's wife. A Dalit woman of the same village she uses a highly moralistic language to represent 'Phool' as a loose woman and a whore who does not deserve the communities' sympathy. Thus, these two women from the same class and caste present two different ideological positions. Phool uses her beauty and sexuality to meet her material needs, and thereby challenges patriarchal codes. Banshi locates herself firmly within the patriarchal norms. Jatin Bala suggests that Banshi's diatribe might arise out of her jealousy of Phool's beauty. Nevertheless her suggestion of Phool's complicity in her exploitation complicates and destabilizes the image of the Dalit woman as a submissive victim. Phool is not without agency though she might suggest that she is a victim of her poverty and was forced by hunger to take a rich, Brahman lover. Each individual or group brands Phool to undercut the argument of injustice offered in her favour. The Dalits use this pretext to turn away from Nogar Dhali, even though they had supported him earlier.

Nogar Dhali discovers a changed atmosphere in the Nomo 'para' in the morning. Haren Biswas asks him to forget the incident of the night as it would present him in a bad light. He reminds him that he has taken the 'Barga' of Satish Sharma's land and it would be wise not to antagonise him. He tells him to be prudent and wait till he can take the produce home. He further advises him to be practical and says that his wife has not run away with Satish Sharma's son therefore he should let the matter be and ask forgiveness of Satish Sharma. He is asked to swallow the insult and be prudent. Under the threat of the Brahmans, his own people desert him and point fingers at his wife's character and mock him. Nobody is ready to accept that his wife is the victim of the Brahman's lust and power. He refuses to listen to his people and arrives in the Brahman para to get justice. They present a united front and ask him to apologise to Satish Sharma. He protests and threatens them and walks away in despair and anger.

Brahmanic power makes Mahendra Rai rebuke the Dalit protestors when they suggest that how would the Brahmans feel if the Dalit men misbehaved with their women? He tells them that the 'low caste' is known by their 'lowly' behaviour and not by their physical self. Banshi refuses to accept the said stereotype and retorts tauntingly that they know about the so called 'good' qualities of the Brahman and asks him to stop shouting at them. They refuse to be browbeaten by the Brahmans. Most of the vocal Dalit men in the group are drunk. It is ironical that their bravado deserts them when day breaks and they are sober. Their outspoken accusations during the night express their discontent and frustrations and suggest the possibility and path of Dalit resistance to Brahmanic

4 | The Dalit Peasant's Struggle for Self...

hegemony. This image is curtailed by their demeanor in the morning which is based on the realisation of their social and economic powerlessness and dependency on Brahman patronage.

They are also led astray by their gullibility and belief in the Brahman Shymal Thakur's good intentions. The Dalit protesters could have done considerable damage through their united front had not Shymal Thakur cajoled them to go back home and return for justice in the morning. In the guise of being their well wisher he destroys and derails their protest. The Brahmans unite and plan out their strategy at night. They break the Dalit unity through veiled threats of withdrawal of their patronage. Shyamal Thakur indirectly hints that they should defer from being violent as it would unnecessarily embroil them with the police. He exploits their fear of the police to disperse them. Once the crowd leaves, Shomir Sharma the culprit comes out of hiding and expresses his hatred for the 'lower castes'. He exclaims that he should have shot a few of the 'low caste' men and that worse things happen to Dalits in other villages but they do not dare to unite and protest. Shymal Thakur reminds him that times have changed and the Dalits can no longer be so easily used as pawns. Shymal Thakur is a Brahman politician who hobnobs with the Dalits but his real self is exposed when he demonstrates that his sympathies do not lie with the Dalits but with his own caste people. He uses the Dalits for political gain but does not genuinely care for them. Jatin Bala thus suggests that Dalits have to fight their battles on their own. He also indicates the importance of 'caste' consciousness and unity for the Dalits to contest the Brahmanic hegemony. In the story 'upper caste' politicians hobnob with the 'lower castes' but, when the time comes the Brahmans unite to safeguard their interests. The Brahmans are irritated by the politicians amidst them who encourage Dalits in the name of voter politics. The wife of Nikhil Banerjee, a politician, asks him to bathe before he touches her because he had been in contact with the 'lower castes'. Bala suggests that political contingency rather than an egalitarian ideology brings the Brahmans to the Dalits, therefore social stigmas regarding Dalits remain.

The locale of the story "Koshti Pathor" (*GB*, 59) is a remote village called 'Hishabi' which has farmers, farm labourers, share croppers and the very poor. Sanatan Biswas is a member of this village, which has lost all due to a new system of agriculture that's heavily dependent on chemical fertilizers. Some villagers have left for the city or gone in search of work to other states. Sanatan mortgages his family home and becomes a hawker in the local trains. One day Sanatan falls from the train and his legs are amputated. His wife Sevadasi takes on the burden of the household.

The writer in the story wants to write a story about Sevadasi to send it to a competition. The focus of the competition is "Mati Aar Manush" i.e. (Land and Man). He hopes to find an unbiased critic who will appreciate the realistic portrayal of the pain and suffering of the Dalit people in his stories. He empathizes with his characters as he is one of them. He writes about real people who are close to nature and life. His realistic technique becomes his mode of protest and a means of asserting his 'difference' from the dominant crowd. The writer asserts that the days of sympathy based literature are gone and the demand of the times is 'empathy'. He suggests that this feeling of empathy comes from a shared background and experience. The writer in the narrative writes about his own experience of saving Sanatan Biswas when he falls from the train. He thus erases the distance between the writer and the subject, fact and fiction.

Bala significantly notes that the subject matter of the writer is not failed people, but fighters who know how to survive. This is a reference to dominant depiction of the Dalit as a failed individual. The Dalit writer in the story can empathize with his characters because he too is a survivor. His father used to hawk roasted peanuts in the local trains that his mother used to prepare. Bala says, "Somewhere there is a deep bond between his life and the life story he narrates and therein lies the strength of his pen" (*GB*, 62). The Dalit writer's ideology is based on his marginal

identity and reality. The writer represents his characters as his “soul relatives” (attar attiyo), the touchstone of an authentic representation.

The peasant woman Sebadasi is a fighter and has the power to inspire the writer. He recalls the image of a helpless Sebadasi beside the hospital bed of Sanatan and tries to compare her with the middle aged haggard woman selling fried snacks at the fair. Sebadasi had thanked him for having saved her husband and the writer approaches her with the firm belief that she would remember him. When he speaks to her she fails to recognize him. She hurls invectives at him and suggests he is either a pickpocket or a peeping Tom. The writer cannot understand the change in her behaviour. He refuses to leave and asks her about her son. She informs him that he has got a new mother. The son has got educated and does not want to acknowledge his old, uneducated mother. She informs him that, “when a woman grows old she is of no use to anybody” (*GB*, 64). Her face, distorted with hate looks very ugly. The writer moves away as he realises that she is unable to recognise him. He had kept track of Sebadasi and knew about her struggles to bring up her son and educate him. The writer is not able to accept the tremendous change in Sebadasi. He leaves the fair and does not feel like looking at her again. His ambivalence towards her suggests his lack of sensitivity or empathy for the Dalit woman. He remains limited by his male point of view. Jatin Bala suggests that the writer’s pain in creating and giving shape to the story surpasses that suffered by a woman during child birth. He privileges male creativity over female creation of new life. The process of writing is equated to the process of giving birth but it is represented as the “superior labour” because writing can destroy the “darkness” within people (*GB*, 65).

In “Bargkhetrer Chaturtho Bahu” (The Fourth Arm of The Circumference) (*GB*, 80), Jatin Bala speaks in his own voice as a Dalit author and asserts that he has spent much of his time in the villages of Bengal and seen how the village people live in times of plenty and poverty. He says that he writes about the injustice and oppression he witnesses around him. The context of the story is an award ceremony organized to encourage successful farmers. The awardees are dressed in heavily starched shirts and dhotis along with uncomfortable shoes; unlike city people their faces wear genuine smiles. The photographer and the officers ask them to smile for the camera. A short dark man with curly hair, sporting a half shirt and dhoti protests that they have been brought there since morning and have not been given anything to eat. They are farmers and their hunger cannot be satisfied by mere tea and biscuits. The straight talking man is Johor Sarkar, a resident of Shona village. The author likes his open nature and as promised visits his home. During discussion Johor says that religion and casteism are the bane of the country. Johor is a Namasudra peasant who fled East Pakistan after the riots and settled in West Bengal. He recounts his initial experience in the Brahman locality and concludes that casteism in Bengal operates subtly and is not visible as open confrontation. He terms it a “cold war” (thanda ladai) (*GB*, 81). The Namasudra refugees had at first taken shelter in the Brahman locality but they soon discover that members of their group begin to die mysteriously. The local people refuse to sell land to the ‘lower caste’ for fear they would settle there permanently and grow in strength. They are forced to leave and settle in a new place which they make habitable. He asserts that in spite of the adversities he “did not get lost or become a loser” (*GB*, 82). The refugees make a place for themselves in the ‘new country’. They reflect a strong pioneer spirit. Johor Sarkar narrates the experiences of his people and terms it “itihash” or history. It is a history of caste discrimination in the form of casteist insults. He tells the author that the locals call the SCs, “Shonar Chand” i.e. (golden moon) and the STs “Shonar Tukro” (a piece of gold). It is a sarcastic reference to their special status as people who are favoured by policies of positive discrimination. The hatred toward them is deep seated.

He gives another illustration of casteism in Bengal. One day he was standing in line to buy a railway ticket, a good looking ‘upper caste’ person sarcastically noted that, “the government had

not yet made the provision to have separate lines for the scheduled castes?" (GB, 82). He also tells him how the neighbouring villagers refer to them as 'Nomo' and treat them as untouchables and spit on them. He narrates another incident to further substantiate his claims of deep seated casteism in West Bengal. He had once saved a girl from drowning in the neighbouring 'upper caste' village the mother of the girl purified her with holy Ganges water before taking her home. He opines that casteism is destroying the Nation and that Dalit strength lies in 'unity'. The author feels that the Dalit writer and the Dalit peasant are alike - both are rooted to the soil and create out of it. The author wonders why the Dalit majority continues to be backward and not really be part of the Nation.

He visits Shona village again after a gap of five years. A lot has happened since he met a confident and vocal Johor. Johor is now a madman. The people tell him that Jahor became mad after the massacre of twenty one Dalit peasants of his village who were killed at night by stiling their throats. The violence silences Johor. The rational, vocal Dalit protagonist is rendered speechless; he withdraws into himself and views the whole world as his enemy. There is a complete loss of meaning and silence reigns. The author cannot speak to Johor because the mad Johor is beyond his narrative and analytical control.

The mad Dalit character fractures the narrative and disrupts its neat categories. The 'real' again disrupts the Dalit writer's expectations from the rebel Dalit self. The violence Johor witnesses scars his body and mind and disfigures his self-conception. The 'madness' of his present self is a stark contrast to his former rational self. Ironically, in madness he becomes truly transgressive. His madness is a shield against the irrational brutality of the outside world. The organized rational and critical self gets scattered due to the violence committed on his community. Bala thus points to the close relational contiguity between the Dalit and his communal self. But, the individual Dalit self and the communal self do not always go in tandem with one another. Most of Bala's stories reflect the fissures within the Dalit community and self. These ruptures hinder the formation of a homogenous Dalit unit where the various Dalit selves would seamlessly cohere. Thus, the Dalit writer fails to empathise with, his female subject, and the community fails to sympathise with and care for Johor.

There remains a gap between the writer's story and Sebadasi's story. He brings about no effective change in the Dalit woman's life. He seems to use her as much as the others have done and remains unaware about it. The writer cannot empathise with a debased Sebadasi on account of his middle class male morality.

Presumably the quest of the fictional author was for the true subject matter and mode of representing the Dalit. This quest also explores the dimensions of the Dalit writer's subjectivity vis-a-vis his subject. Jatin Bala initially suggests that the Dalit writer's sense of community and commonality with his subject helps him to empathize and represent his subject authentically. But the distaste with which he reacts to Shebadashi reveals the limitations of such a premise. Jatin Bala seems to approve the fictional writer's thesis because he shows that the writer wins the short story writing competition owing to his narrative honesty and authenticity. The fictional writer presents the crude reality of Dalit life and does not alter or gloss over uncomfortable details. He suggests that the dominant fail to represent the 'real' Dalit. Their representations tend to be mediated, sanitized constructions of the real world of the Dalit or a grossly exaggerated negative picture. The narrative illustrates that the real world does not function according to a fixed paradigm or pattern and the realistic writer should present it without editing it.

Jatin Bala thus privileges the Dalit writer's 'truth' as it is based on his self-experience. The story illustrates how the real world functions erratically and ruptures the fictional Dalit writer's preconceived notions regarding Shebadashi. She presents the female Dalit self as it becomes conscious about its subjectivity and agency. She refuses to conform to the image of the good, soft

spoken, homely woman she had presented to the writer when her husband had become a cripple. She had then adopted the role of the caring mother and wife and had taken up the onus of financially supporting her husband and son. This image of the self-sacrificing woman is readily accepted and lauded by the male fictional Dalit writer.

But, when her families' betrayal and rejection transforms her into a foul-mouthed transgressive figure, the male writer is not able to accept that image. He is further disturbed because she refuses to recognize and acknowledge the writer. Her silence regarding their previous association is a denial of her former self and the codes that ordain or contain that self. She presents a very reductive view of the man-woman relationship when she tells the writer that a dried up old woman, without any 'juice' is of no use to men. She rips apart the patriarchal rhetoric of love and represents the man-woman relationship to be exploitative of women and their bodies, where women occupy the subordinate position and men have control over their body as well as their mind. She represents the men as peeping Toms who gaze into women's blouses or petticoats. She accuses the fictional author of a similar intent. She also suggests that her own son abandons her for a younger mother because her lap is warmer than hers. Thus, she suggests that the sexual contaminates all man-woman transactions.

As a mark of protest she places herself beyond the female 'body' and uses a 'male' language that is full of cuss words. She is deliberately dirty and wears soiled clothes to mark her difference from the sexually attractive women. She refuses to represent herself as a desirable body. The fictional male writer fails to critically take note of her stance. He represents her merely as a victim of patriarchal society and poverty. He fails to notice her construction of an alternate self. Thus, his representation of the unmediated reality of Sebadasi in his story is problematic. The portrayal of the Dalit reiterates the stereotypes of the Dalit as dirty, uncouth etc. This presumably impresses the judges and he wins the competition. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that he did not present Sebadasi's story from a patriarchal male point of view. In the narrative the male Dalit fictional writer cannot empathize with the transformed woman who deconstructs patriarchal notions of womanhood. His failure further deconstructs the notion of Dalit 'empathy' that he had posited in the beginning as an important aspect of the Dalit writer's self. This empathy functions on the premise of a commonality between the Dalit writer and his subject. Thus, it appears that the Dalit writer's notions of realism, empathy, and solidarity are constructions that do not operate uniformly and get jettisoned by the fault lines of caste, class and gender.

ⁱ Jatin Bala, *Gandir Bande Bhangar*, Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 2000. It will be abbreviated as *GB* henceforth.

BIO-NOTE

Dr Brati Biswas is an Associate Professor of English at Dyal Singh Evening College University of Delhi. She has a PhD on Dalit literature of Bengal from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. She has published and presented articles on a wide range of topics from feminism to Dalit literature. She translates from Bangla to English and Hindi. She is also a practicing poet.

E-mail Id:- brati41@gmail.com