

The Narrative of Imposed Identity and Epistemic Violence: A Comparative Study of Laxman Gaikwad's "*The Branded Uchalya*" and M.M. Biswas's "*Surviving in My World*"

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Abstract

Imposing negative identity to any individual or community can be a deliberate act. The underlying agenda of an act as such always leads to what is called "*epistemic violence*" and an indirect way of the exploitation and maintenance of supremacy. The power holders, throughout the world across the time and milieu, use such method as a tool for the same purposes. The colonial masters used it over colonized during the colonisation, patriarchal society practiced it over women to maintain gender disparity, white masters used it over the blacks to sustain racism, and upper caste people in Indian subcontinent practiced it over untouchable to survive caste system. The present paper attempts to do a comparative study of the two different but similar narratives of such imposed identities and its consequences. Laxman Gaikwad has narrated the story of his Uchalya community being "branded criminal" in his autobiographical novel "*The Branded*". Mouli Monahar Biswas has described the story of his Namashudra community being categorised as "untouchable" refugees in his autobiography "*Surviving in my World*".

Keywords- Imposed identity, tool of exploitation, branded criminal, refugee, epistemic violence

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Introduction:

Recently five Tribal women from the same tribal village of Jharkhand were brutally hacked to death by other tribal villagers after branding them as witches (5 Women Killed). Branding identity, especially negative one, upon any individual or community can also be a deliberate act which could be, according to Spivak, a sort of an "epistemic violence" the violence related to knowledge production.

Right the way through age and milieu, the power holders use different techniques and methods to maintain their supremacy over the powerless. To maintain supremacy after branding any negative identity is proven as one of the safest and most powerful tools used by the power holders. However, the primary motive of such act is always an indirect way of exploitation. More than that, any imposed negative identity of any individual or community causes inhuman mental and physical sufferings, social boycotting, materialistic exploitation and even killing. Once such negative identity is imposed, it would be very difficult to get rid of.

Recapping the history, hundreds of such examples can be found. During the colonization, the colonial masters had been using this powerful tool to maintain their

supremacy over the colonized for centuries. Ironically, perhaps, they learnt such tricks from the European renaissance and practiced it over their colonies. The colonizers realized the need to control them mentally before ruling them physically. Seemingly, the British had colonized the minds of the people from the colonies first before ruling them physically. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said has described the process how the so-called self proclaimed “superior”, “civilized” West successfully attributed many negative identities on the fate of colonized such as "other", "uncivilized", "barbaric" and "white man's burden". To maintain their hegemony, the colonizers often used such tool to suppress the voice of the "others" after branding them as "Cannibal", "rebel", “anti-British” “terrorist” so and so forth .

In the Vedic period of India, as most of the Dalit scholars claim, the Aryan race invaded India and relegated the native to the position of slaves. To perpetuate the Aryan supremacy, they implemented *Chaturvarna* system in the name of religion .The natives were pigeonholed as the "shudra" or "untouchable". Thus, the untouchable community of Indian subcontinent is still carrying the heavy burden of such imposed identity along with its caste hatred and violence even in the twenty first century.

In the same way, when French Feminist writer and critic Simon de Beauvoir argues that " One is not born, but rather becomes a women” (Beauvoir). By saying this, she perhaps wants to narrate the story of carrying the heavy burden of another kind of imposed identity, the identity of being women in the patriarchal society. Similarly, any black narrative will tell the same story of the jerky journey of carrying such imposed identity.

The present paper is intended to do a comparative study of the two different but similar narratives of such imposed identity and its consequences. Laxman Gaikwad, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner Dalit writer and social activist from Maharashtra, has told his

narrative in his autobiographical novel *The Branded Uchalya*. Manohar Mauli Biswas, also one of the leading Dalit writers, critics and social activists from West Bengal, has described the burden of imposed identity in his autobiography, *surviving in My World*.

Though both the authors are geographically, linguistically and culturally different, they are similar in terms of their bitter and terrible experiences and sufferings, being the victims of such imposed identities.

Laxman Gaikwad belongs to the nomadic *Uchalya* community of Latur district of Maharashtra. In his novel, Laxman Gaikwad has documented not only the experiences of inhuman physical and mental tortures of his own family but also his *Uchalya* community after being declared as “branded Criminal” by the British Government under the provision of criminal Acts in 1871.

The novel starts with a brief description of Gaikwad family's miserable social and economic condition. Like other families of his *Uchalya* community, his family is landless and jobless. They live in a small hut in which everyone had to crawl on his/her hands and knees to get in or out. Gaikwad's grandfather initially used to sustain the entire family by stealing, pick-pocketing and other unlawful works. But when his grandfather became useless by the heavy torture of police atrocities, the onus of sustaining the family fell on the shoulders of Laxman's three brothers. Generally, they visited the market, fair, other crowded places and involved themselves in pickpocketing, snatching gold chain, neckless, or other items like chappals, clothes depending on their chances. The police would come to their home anytime and thrash the women and the children, humiliate and molest the young women. They would snatch anything they would like. In the words of the author:

Like a pack of wolves they (the police) suddenly visit his family and beat them search out hut, when they did not get anything, they extort money from them by with the threading of arrest and imprisonment. The police would beat us making false allegation of thefts, even when, in fact, no theft had been committed the police themselves were left with no option but to steal. We would borrow money to give to the police. (Gaikwad 62)

Police would arrest many children of nomadic and denotified tribes by false accusation and put them into jail. In fact, it was the police who pushed these young ones into criminal activities by such barbarous treatment. The money lenders left no stone unturned to exploit this community too. They bought the stolen materials in a cheap rate. The money lenders would give them money on high interest either to meet the police demand or some other urgent purposes. As a result, they were forced to steal on order to pay back not only the original amount but also the interest.

When these people would go to the cities, they also face same problems. They will not get any work. Nobody is ready to rent a room to them. They have to wander into the city like the street dogs, have to survive with the thrown-out filthy food. The children of this community do not go to school because for them the food is more important than education. Apart from that, they would face numbers of social problems if anyone would go to school. The most difficult problem would be their identity as "the branded criminal". The children of the *Uchalya* community will not be accepted easily not only by the other students from upper caste sections but also by most of the teachers. However, Laxman Gaikwad, by some means, managed to get a bit of education. But his journey of education was heart touching. He had to face not only physical tortures but also enormous mental agony and trauma by others students

and by the fathers of others students. Even he had to face many hurdles from his own community including his own family. The parents of others students too did not want that a child of *Uchalya* community would go to school with their children. So they tried their best to stop them from going to school anyhow.

Regretfully, Gaikwad said that his community still could not get rid of such stigma and is being exploited in different ways. Only the manners and methods of exploitations have been changed. He says:

But I felt that not a single problem of the Nomadic and Denitrified Tribes has yet been solved. Even today the attitude of political and social leaders is vitiated by double standards and prejudiced criteria only because I and my community have been branded criminals socially and legally. These high cast leaders see to it that I attain no position of advantage, find no firm foothold in their field. They create rich pastures for their own kith and kins. (232)

Thus, Gaikwad has described the terror and violence of imposed identity through the sufferings of his *Uchalya* community.

Biswas 's autobiography, *Surviving in My World*, has described the heavy burden of another kind of imposed identity of his Namashudra community. Biswas belongs to the untouchable community of Bengal known as Namashudras. Earlier majority of untouchable Community of Bengal was known as *Chandala*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, two Dalit leaders Harichand Thakur and Guru Chand Thakur of Bengal started a mass movement known as Namashudra Movement that was directed against all kinds of caste oppressions. The untouchable community of Bengal not only castigated the religious rituals and practices of the Veda and Brahmins but also formed a new religion known as *Matua Cult*. Like

Narayan Guru, an untouchable from Ezhava caste of Kerala demanded for "One caste, one religion, one God for man", Harichand Thakur an Untouchable from Namashudra caste of Bengal raised the slogan – "Naa maani Veda, Naa maani Brahman" which means we do not obey the Vedas, we do not obey the Brahmin.

At a time the movement became so much powerful that Dr. B.R Ambedkar, who could not get himself nominated from his own state Maharashtra, got elected in the constituent assemble from the Bengal province in the year 1946. But one year later, the partition of Bengal in 1947 not only crushed the spirit of the movement but also scattered the whole *Namashudra* community in various places. Those who remained in East Pakistan, (now Bangladesh) became a minority in the Muslim dominated country and those who came to India crossing the new border found themselves as refugees. Thus they were branded as a refugee in their own birthplace. Being refugee, they had to live under trees, on railway platforms, on roads in refugee camps. In the name of rehabilitation, many of them were sent forcefully to Dhandakaranya of Madhya Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Island and other uninhabited pockets of India. Some of the Dalit refugees squarely blame the government for their miseries. They feel that the state's approach was extremely prejudiced as they belong to the untouchables Monaranjan Byapari (2007), one such refugee and leading Dalit writers of Bengal accuses that unlike the upper caste refugees, his community receive partial treatment from the government in his article *Is there any Dalit Writings in Bengal?*

When the upper caste people uprooted from East Bengal set up some 149 unauthorized new colonies in and around Kolkata- in Jadavpur, Dumdum, Sodepur, etc, the state did not take any action against them. But when the

Namashudras attempted to occupy an uninhabited island in the Sundarbans area called Marichjhapi, unspeakable atrocities were committed by the state machinery to evict them from there. (4119)

The mass killing is well-known as Marichjhapi Massacre happened in 1979. Almost hundreds of Bengali Dalit refugees were killed including children and old; their newly build cottages were burnt and women were raped in the process of vacation. (The Silence Of Marichjhapi). Meenakshi Mukherjee refers it "as one of the darkest episodes of the Bengal history. It was conveniently erased from national memory until the novelist Amitav Ghosh recreated it in vivid detail in his novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004".(Byapari,4118)

Today one can easily discern such Bengali Dalits refugees in the slums of Kolkata, nearby Howrah, Sealdah, and Bonga railway stations. In the main city of Kolkata, one can find them barefooted pulling hand rickshaw or polishing shoes or clean dustbins, or fighting with street dogs for leftover foods. Thus, they are somehow surviving themselves according to the cruel theory of struggle for existence.

Biswas has tried to describe such experience of his Dalit refugee community in his autobiography. Even the title of this autobiography indicates that the world of the author, as well as the world of his community, is different and painful. In his words-

My world is of great pain, one of being pitied by others...this world of mine is the Dalits' world of illiteracy, the Dalits' world of poverty, the world of keeping the Dalits powerless, the Dalits' world of sickness, the world of spending childhood in malnutrition the world of being unwanted, the world of jealousy-violence-hatred-abuse, the world of the multitudes staying alive, gasping. (xix)

Biswas has described the heavy burden of such identity as a refugee of his community through his own jerky journey from one place to another. Along with his family when Biswas came to West Bengal after crossing the border, he found himself a foreigner. His relatives were sent to Bahraich district of Utter Pradesh and Maharashtra. He himself had to go to Utter Pradesh. He tried to get admission in one of the collages there but he was not allowed to get admission because of his identity as a foreigner. However, he returned to West Bengal by train without a ticket and got shelter at the home of his distant relatives. There, he had to work hard as a labourer. He manages somehow to get admission in a college by the loan of twenty rupees from a distant uncle. He stood first in the ISc exam and a fellowship was sanctioned. But his identity as a dalit refugee became the barrier for him to avail that fellowship. Thus, Biswas narrates the pain of being carrying the identity of being Dalit refugee. He compared himself with a vagabond, a hanging pendulum as he mournfully said-

"Yes, I become a vagabond refugee in India" (Biswas, 93).

Conclusion:

The sufferings of Biswas and Gaikwad are not merely the sufferings of two individuals or two communities but the sufferings of thousands Gaikwads, Biswas and many other communities. Even today, across the world, there are many Gaikwads and Biswas are the victims of such imposed identity. There are many suppressed voices who want to tell the similar stories of carrying imposed identities. In the country like India, thousands of Gaikwads and Biswas are still facing the same problems. Now the question that arises in the present context is whether it becomes quite easy to humiliate and torture any person belonging to a particular region or a particular community just in the name of so called "Moist" or "Naxal" or "Anti-National" or "Terrorist"?

Therefore, great care should be taken while imposing any such negative identity. Even if it is to be imposed it should be done after a fair and thorough investigation. And while doing so, it should be kept in mind that his/her relatives or the community to which that person belongs should not be adversely affected. The world must pay attention to what Gaikwad, as a representative of such victims of imposed identity, urges at the end of the novel:

"Save us from injustice,'

Give us house;

Give us work;

Brand not the tribe as criminal merely because of its name;

Rehabilitate us"

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