

A Depiction of Different Dalit Dimensions in Nikhilesh Ray's *Kalnattir Kavita*

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Abstract

While delving deep into *Kalnattir Kavita*, a collection of Rajbanshi poems by Nikhilesh Ray, a notion of alternatively different Dalit dimension peeps through the expression of the Rajbanshi people in terms of social, linguistic, economic and geographical positions. The agonized but enlightening poems such as—'Alo' (*Light*), 'Kalnatti' (*Darkened Night*), 'Vasa' (*Language*), 'Goromer Din' (*Summer Days*), 'Mansigula' (*The People*), 'Jarer Din' (*Winter Days*), 'Noya Belata Uthuk' (*The New Sun will Arise*), etc. conform to the fact that they are the part of a literary and linguistic experimentation which is flowing from the 'Below'. So, here, the movement is from the 'Margin' to the 'Centre'—a strive to find out a 'Symbolic centre'. The book provides a bold cry of 'Revolt' against that as well as presents the aesthetics of the Deleuzean 'Minor Literature' pointing out that a huge and heavy 'Possibility' (in Deleuzean sense) is there in this literature. Ray's capable hand also questions the deep 'silence' (which may be because of the 'Habit' in the great philosopher Bourdieu's sense) of this community—'Can the Subaltern Speak?' as to employ Spivak's phraseology. So, the poems are the milestones of a journey—a journey towards achieving a different Rajbanshi social and linguistic position.

Keywords: *Dalit, Margin, Centre, Symbolic Centre, Minor Literature, Possibility, Habit and Becoming.*

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Kalnattir Kavita (Poetry of the Darkened Night), a collection of Rajbanshi poems by Nikhilesh Ray deals with the Rajbanshi community—mostly dwelling in North Bengal and Assam. The poems of this collection present the Rajbanshi community's age old sufferings because of the social, linguistic and economic deprivations havocted upon them. The Rajbanshis are not Dalit so far as the literal meaning of the term is concerned—they do not belong to the Category of 'Panchamas'. Rather they all are Khatriyas. But their social position makes them Dalit if the term is looked at from a different perspective. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee in her Introduction to Om Prokash Valmiki's *Jothan* elucidates the similar notions—"dominant discourse of postcolonial and subaltern theories does not only refuse to the high caste status of these writers but presents them as resistant voices, representing the position of the colonized." (Mukherjee 2003. Xiii). In the similar vein, a notion of alternatively different Dalit dimension peeps through the expression in all of the poems of Nikhilesh Ray in *Kalnattir Kavita*. The agonized but enlightening poems such as—'Alo' (Light), 'Kalnatti' (Darkened Night), 'Vasa' (Language), 'Goromer Din' (Summer Days), 'Mansigula' (The People), 'Jarer Din' (Winter Days), 'Noya Belata Uthuk' (The New Sun will Arise), etc. conform to the fact that they are the part of a literary and linguistic experimentation which is flowing from the 'Below'. So, here, the movement is from the 'Margin' to the 'Centre'—a strive to find out a 'Symbolic centre' rubbing off the age-old injustices, neglect, deprivation, hatred and oppression cast upon a vast community by the so called mainstream Bengali Tradition.

As in all the Dalit literature, Rajbanshi literature has all the potentialities to be a global literature and the part of what is called the Indian English Literature. The age old social injustices and the 'Neo-colonial' trends serve as the main elements of the dominant discourse of the upper-class Brahmins to exploit the 'possibilities' of the Rajbanshi literature and the poet of this literature like Ray is desperately searching for that lost light of possibility. 'Alo' (Light), a poem in the collection *Kalnattir Kavita* is a perfect epitome to this point. This 'light' is the light of 'identity'—the poet is untiringly trying to find out a light that is the light of knowledge about his own self—

"In my mind I draw a light

That light grows slowly." (Ray 11)

It is a light that should be nourished and cared for very tenderly or else it would soon be extinguished in the far fading horizon. The poet here prioritizes the goals of Rajbanshis' life—he

sets the first priority of life to nourish the light rather than to get and devour ‘Chaka’ (a Rajbanshi dish prepared with eatable Soda) and ‘Shidal’ (a delicious Rajbanshi dish prepared with the dry fish and is entitled to eat on the eve of Kalipuja). So, what does this mean? Why is the poet telling the Rajbanshis not to have a sweet nap after engulfing the juicy dishes but to nourish the light? It means a lot—a lot of sufferings and sacrifice on behalf of the Rajbanshis to get their identity back. Physical lavishness is a mere luxury to them—they are not craving for a good meal and to be at ease. Rather they, like the poet, take a vow to distribute that light from door to door—

I distribute that light from door to door

This is not belly’s but my hurt’s hunger. (Ray 11)

This ‘hunger’ is the hunger for self knowledge and identity which leads toward a path of greater suffering. Thus, the poet’s searching for Alo(light) is anonymous with that of the identity search of all the Rajbanshis—

In my mind I draw a light

That light draws me rather. (Ray 11)

Just as the Tamil and Marathi Dalit poets, Ray here has a great liking for the ‘Revolutionary Sprit’. That is why the poet likes the summer most in his poem ‘*Goromer Din*’ (*Summer Days*)—not the romantic rainy or melancholic autumn. Rather he has a great affinity for summer in which black clouds and sudden heavy storm etc. are making the season ‘masculine’—

Black clouds, sudden rains, perforated roof

Drenched in a nook, holding the belly, one day, two days, three...

—O sky, when would you be clear! (Ray 15)

Symbolically, it is a revolutionary spirit to breakdown and demolish all the age old, worn out and rusted traditions of condemning the ‘Rajbanshi Culture and tradition’ in the so called great Bengali tradition—‘Babu Culture’.

Ray’s poems are the burning episodes of the succinct sufferings of the Rajbanshi language. It is very vivid in terms of the linguistic parameter that this language is at its stake because of its difference from the mainstream traditional Bengali language. This difference is so often termed as the ‘lack’ of the Rajbanshi language—the lack of sophistication and sobriety. This language is being continuously judged by its ‘lack’ but not by its difference which can be its power and the flicker of possibility. Ray in his poem ‘*Vasa*’ (*Language*), commemorates that language is like a free bird. It does not restrict itself in any boundary, any time, place and nation. It is just like the clear water of a river flowing beyond boundaries—

In the sky a bird flies

Language is just like that bird

The water of the river flows shining

Language is just like that water,

See, language flies, language flows...(Ray 14)

So, nobody can make any restriction to that 'fly' and 'flow' of the language. But the poet portrays the scenario in such a way that the Rajbanshi language is not flying and flowing in its own way—all the paths of possibility are hindered and made short by taking the fact as granted that this language is inferior and less sophisticated than the mainstream Bengali language, without even having a mere glimpse at the gems and sapphires of this language. Their language and their 'voice' have been taken away from them so that they cannot 'speak'—they cannot seek their own justice. They are voiceless now having no identity and become utterly embarrassing 'nobody' when they try to gain a 'voice' of their own and to speak. Rather they are being 'represented' by the mainstream 'center' and their 'voice'(if u can call it even a voice) is being 'replaced' by the voice of the representative. They cannot speak for themselves in their own voice by the help of their own language—the problem faced by all the Dalit communities in the universe. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' questions the mode of 'representation' and suggests the way of way of speaking by them—"lets the oppressed speak for themselves."(Spivak1988:292). And Stephen Morton while interpreting Spivak illustrates that—"the benevolent impulse to represent subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them" (Morton:56). This deliberate silencing gives birth to so many deep agonized souls in the midst of them and they want to 'chikiri' (shout) and to throw away all the binaries from their throat—

"When we shout

The language that flows from that shout

That simple language is redirected by the water of any river."(Ray 14)

The revolutionary insight buried in the mind of the Rajbanshi community is clear in Ray's use of this kind of phraseology—'chikiri'(shout). This single word opens up a vista of the age old oppressing hegemony of suppressing a language which is the Rajbanshis' own by way of making them differently Dalit. This suppression is the way through which their language is taken away from them—they lost their voice—they become dumb in the world of repression—a 'Reductive Tendency' in the words of Gilles Deleuze to make the 'margins' voiceless—thrusting them into the dark region—pushing them up to the margins—where they have to 'chikiri' (shout) to express their voice, feeling, heart and the life mingled up with the long oppressional history cast upon them. Now the question is that will somebody be willing to listen to that voice? Or is it just a unheard 'shouting' just like the picture of Edward Munch? As Spivak states in an interview, "the subaltern cannot speak" means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she (here the Rajbanshis) is not able to be heard" (Spivak: 292). It is not that Ray only just is posing some difficult questions but he gives the solution by providing the way out from this catastrophe—

"Language is just like a flying bird, for that bird needs open sky

And for the river there needs open muddy path.” (Ray 14)

So, what needs for the Rajbanshi is the ‘scope’ to flourish its possibility and more and more ‘different’ voices from the nook and corner so that their actuated and actualized ‘Being’[done by the centre] becomes ‘Becoming’—a virtual plane of potential, so as to use the conception of Deleuze—“ life begins with pure difference or becoming, or tendencies to differ—such as the differential waves of sound and light, and these differences are then actualized by different points of perception: such as the human eye. Our world of beings, the extended term that we perceive, are contractions of flows of becoming”(Deleuze:126). Similarly the phrases ‘open sky’ and ‘muddy path’ indicate the desire of the Rajbanshis to have different voices so that they can get different looks at directed towards their indigenous culture and language.

The inhibition of habit is a static notion in the Rajbanshi socio-cultural life. They are completely habituated to those life-long sufferings. Their numbness and stupor make them completely a rockfish stature having nothing to say and having all the senses confined. As Bourdieu suggested that—“the habitus consists of both the hexis(the tendency to hold and use one’s body in a certain ways, such as posture and accent) and more abstract mental habits, schemes of perception, classification, appreciation, feeling and action.”(Bourdieu 143) .Ray is very much aware of the situation and confines it in his poem ‘Mansigula’(The People)—

The people are gazing blankly, leaders come and go

In the vast open field, it is the time of truth what they want to show. (Ray 16)

This ‘mere gazing’ does not give them their lost identity back and they would never be able to retrieve their own land which had long been overtaken forcefully from them. The lament of the poet is clear in his versifying the fact—

No fruit at mere gaze, when will you say about us

Trusting own land to the others, how long will you be a fool thus?

Empty belly with bonny body stand back turning and rippling

When grew thus they so big the little sapling! (Ray 16)

They trusted their own land to the others and eventually it becomes a habit which they breathe to ‘practice’ everyday and the naturalization of this habit makes their culture and language a ‘represented’ inferior. They remain silent and that silence becomes a habit as Lizardo in “The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu’s Habitus” points out—“Habitus is a system of embodied dispositions, tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it. These dispositions are usually shared by people with similar background in terms of social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, profession etc. as the habitus is acquired through mimesis and reflect the lived reality to which individuals are socialized, their individual experience and objective opportunities.” (Lizardo 387)

But this does not last long—the habit of practicing silence is going to be broken. The politicians and the false promise would not be entertained further as they are arousing themselves from the hundreds years of solitude and try to shout all the agonies out—

“When they shout with closed fists the sky tethers with their hand moth

Throat bleeds also the veins when they want to shout.” (Ray 16)

They stair up together to form a unified whole so that it would help them to protest against that ‘representation’ of their culture and language—

“Leaders come and go, the people stir

Themselves from this and that side of the field to gather together.” (Ray 16)

Another different dalit dimension is very evident in the poems of Ray. His poetry is replete with the revolutionary tone of the Rajbanshis. Their protest against the injustices and deprivations done to them is not silent rather a heavy melancholic storm with the ultimate form of revolt is sweeping through their voices. They believe that in this way of protest a new sun will arise for them to refill the deviations. The poem ‘*Noya Belata Uthuk*’ (*The New Sun will Arise*), is a good case in point where the poet aspires for the new hope for this community. He narrates that the social and political situation is very burning and it is done not with great noise—

“The pan is hot

Rice are burning

Who has given the heat?

After thatches and branches gathering?” (Ray 35)

The poet here mentions that through this collective voice, the Rajbanshis are forming a greater brotherhood to achieve their goals—

“Is burning illogical?

It is needed rather

In this way

You are my brother.” (Ray 35)

The force of the revolting spirit in the Rajbanshi poetry is very much different from that of the Tamil Dalit poetry. In the Tamil Dalit poetry the revolting spirit is not as violent and severe as that of the Rajbanshi community. This severity is because of the fact that they are not caste-dalit but even then their dalitness and dalit self evade them to be angry. For this reason in the Rajbanshi poetry there is an utmost cry for the recovery of the ‘self’ and of the identity. A

direct denunciation of the upper class (or caste) is here in *Noya Belata Uthuk'* (*The New Sun will Arise*)—

“Why are you biting
 Even here and there?
 You are enemy
 I'll kick your back to tear.
 I'll tear up your heart
 You sow the fire!
 Is all the corps yours?
 Is only the land my share?” (Ray 35)

Thus, they hope that their new sun of hope will rise one day.

But this kind of revolting spirit leads towards a different dimension when evaluated in the light of the so called dominating perspective. The Rajbanshis for this anger are, now a day, often termed as betrayer of the country (separatist or *bichhinnatabadi*). Their voices are redirected and rearticulated for again suppressing their voice as evident in the words of Ray in his another book *Saampadakiya*— “Then are we here for the linguistic revolution? If you say that it is ‘yes’, it is right, and if you say that it is ‘not’, that is also right. To me revolution is a very grave word, unable to decipher. Simple words— my mother tongue is a strong language full of pearls and gems of the long past, it is neither a dialect nor a part of some other language. In that language of my mother tongue, we want to speak; we want to read and want to write literature and news. Let me speak in my own way; let me write in my own way. None of you would speak of and write something about us out of love. Those who have written, are either fake or have shown scholasticism by learning little—a sheer business—we want you to stop these. This does not matter if you want to outcast and prevent us thinking as fundamentalist. We will do our work by hook and crook.” So, so often the Rajbanshis are out casted as fundamentalist and separatist. Ray's poem *Deshdrohi* (*The Betrayer*) gives vent to this paranoid situation where he shows that the voices of protest are suppressed by entitling them as the voices of separatists—

“How much will you frighten us?
 We will reborn in hundreds thus....
 All fades away slowly
 All want peace truly.
 You'll be blown out at a single fire
 You'll be called a betrayer.” (Ray 27)

So, a strong revolutionary attitude and a heinous social commitment are the ‘purposes’ in writing this kind of poetry as recounted in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* by Sharankumar Limbale (translated by Alope Mukherjee)—“Revolt is the stage that follows anguish and rejection. ‘I am human, I must receive all the rights of a human being’—such is the consciousness that gives birth to this revolt. Born from unrestrained anguish, this explosive rejection and piercing revolt is like a flood, with its aggressive character and an insolent rebellious attitude.” (Limbale 31). Thus, a vast body of Rajbanshi literature is being produced with the same cry of revolt necessitating to overcome this kind of different Dalit dimensions. They are breathing from the ‘below’ but their movement is towards the surface. It is true that they are writing from the ‘Mirgin’ but they are untiringly striving to make a room of their own trying to a ‘Centre’— a ‘symbolic centre’ where they can express their own feelings and thoughts in their own language.

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