

Analysing Selected Bengali Short Stories by Dalit Women Writers Manju Bala and Kalyani Thakur Charal

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Abstract

This paper critically examines selected Bengali short stories by Dalit women writers Manju Bala and Kalyani Thakur Charal, highlighting the intersections of caste, gender, and class in the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Drawing on four translated short stories—"Conflict," "Discrimination," and "The Housemaid Special" by Manju Bala, and "A Hundred Pens" by Kalyani Thakur Charal—the study situates these narratives within the broader tradition of Bangla Dalit literature and its historical evolution. The paper traces the emergence of Dalit writing in Bengal, particularly in relation to the Matua movement, Partition-induced displacement, and the delayed consolidation of a collective Dalit literary consciousness in the region. Through close textual analysis, it reveals how Dalit women's writing articulates everyday forms of humiliation, violence, and exclusion within familial, domestic, and institutional spaces. The characters of Banani, Fuliya, Ketaki, Pocha, and Rekha embody resistance against entrenched caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms, while simultaneously exposing the limits of education, marriage, and professional achievement as pathways to social mobility. The paper further argues that Dalit literature redefines aesthetic values by prioritizing ethical engagement and social justice over conventional notions of beauty and pleasure. Drawing on Sharan Kumar Limbale's formulation of Dalit aesthetics, the study demonstrates how these narratives function as acts of revolt and reclamation, seeking to rewrite historical memory and assert human dignity.

Keywords: *Dalit writings, resilience, caste, Identity and gender*

Introduction

The term ‘Dalit’ has been derived from Sanskrit word ‘dal’, which means cracked, downtrodden, broken, and destroyed. Dalit is a group of people who are historically acknowledged as untouchables, separated from rest of the society by the caste system. In various parts of the India Dalits are referred to by different names, including Outcastes, Depressed Classes, Untouchables, Padadalit, Chandals, Avarna, etc. They experience suffering and hardships at the hands of the higher castes, which they document in their literature known as Dalit literature.

As stated by Sharan Kumar Limbale, “Dalit literature is the writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness”. The sole purpose of Dalit literature is to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to the upper caste Hindus. When the Brahmanical texts were written, dalits were completely erased from the narrative and denied the right to read and write. Later, mainstream writers began to depict dalits as stereotypical and flat characters in their works, which helped readers, feel "sympathy" and "compassion". This marked the shift in literature from erasure to containment. And lastly, the emergence of the working class brought about by European colonialism and the development of the English public education system forced them to read and write. This is when literature like poetry and autobiographical narratives based on real-life began to emerge.

This paper intends to study four Bengali short stories translated into English by Dalit women writers; Manju Bala and Kalyani Thakur Charal. Through these stories, the day-to-day lives of women and the caste issues faced by the downtrodden caste in society are brought to the

forefront. The theme is related to struggle and resistance against caste, gender inequality and exploitation; the subject matter does not originate from the external world but from their family and community itself afflicted with tension, deficiency and tragedy. For the Dalit women writers Kalyani Thakur Charal writes, "The women who lay the skins of cattle to dry, and sit next to them, inhaling the stench, and write by the light of small oil lamp, or those who clean the excrement of the others, or those who cook tasty meals by substituting inexpensive seeds and other ingredients in place of costly vegetables and sit down and write their experiences are the true creators of Dalit literature for future."

Dalit Literature in Bangla

First, in order to comprehend Bangla Dalit literature today, we must first examine a phenomenon known as "Matua sahitya," which arose in the 19th century as a result of the Vaishnava movement led by Sri Chaitanya. The driving force was Harichand Biswas, an East Bengali member of the namahshudra community. By highlighting the role that education plays in societal transformation, he gave his father's beliefs a fresh vitality. Schools for namahshudras did not exist at that time. The first school for the namahshudras was established in the village of Odakand when Guruchand made contact with Mead, an Australian missionary. In three forms of Matua creativity were evident: 'kathakata' (telling stories in big groups), 'jatra' (folk plays), and 'kobi-gaan' (rhymed couplets) produced in the customary 'payar' rhythm and performed aloud in public. The majority of these works combined poetry, history, and popular philosophy in a comprehensible style with the intention of increasing people's consciousness. Some of these verses are now available in print. But a great deal is lost to us because initially these were part of an oral culture. And this movement is recognised as the first organised dalit activity in Bengal.

Secondly, the body of writing that is today designated as "dalit literature" began less than half a century ago in Maharashtra. The term was first used in 1958 and took some time to gain currency. In West Bengal dalit writing began nearly 20 years after Maharashtra, although the central figure of the dalit movement, Babasaheb Ambedkar, had a close relationship with this eastern region. He was elected to the constituent assembly from Bengal through the enterprise of Jogendra Nath Mandal.

Dalits in Bengal are known as the "namahshudras" who were earlier known as chandals. Prior to 1947 almost 90 per cent of them lived in East Bengal in the districts of Khulna, Faridpur, Jessore and Barishal. Their history after Partition is well known. They left their villages out of fear of violence among the community. They crossed the border in the dead of night, leaving behind their homes, their property, and everything they owned. Consequently, for many years following independence, the dalit population in Bengal was so dispersed and demoralised that there was no sign of a collective existence. Writing and other artistic endeavours were unaffordable luxuries in their relentless quest for stability and survival. In other places, Dalits were not forced to live such a precarious existence; instead, they could band together to start literary and social movements. The dalits of Bengal started piecing together their shattered lives only decades later, and now there are a significant number of books, short tales, essays, and poems produced by them.

Bibhutibhusan, Satinath Bhaduri, Tarashankar, Manik Bandopadhyaya, Rabindranath Tagore, and a number of other "progressive" writers are among the writers who have contributed to this tradition. Admittedly, a large number of these earlier writers condescendingly addressed the plight of the socially disadvantaged. They couldn't have written from felt experience, even

though their sympathy has been real. Some observers perceive what the dalit writers are producing now as only carrying on that legacy.

A defining characteristic of each literary or cultural movement in Bengal is the publication of small periodicals. Publishing such journals has a long history, but due to financial constraints, they frequently have an unremarkable appearance. Short stories, poems, and novels followed. At long last, it is evident at the start of the twenty-first century that Bangla dalit literature cannot be ignored, pushed to the periphery, or wished away. It's a sapling that has taken root in the soil, whether one likes it or not, and now it will flourish.

Analysis

In the first story "Conflict" by Manju Bala with the help of the character Banani she depicts the life of a woman who is deprived of fulfilling her dreams and lives a life of compromises.

Banani Mandal (Scheduled Caste) was married to Kalyan Kanjilal (Upper Caste), a would-be doctor whose sole aim in life would be to serve humanity, she was certain that caste distinctions would not concern educated people and that she would have an amazing future with Kalyan as her partner. They both fell in love in the singing classes, and although it's commonly believed that love knows no bounds, for them it did too. When they first fell in love, Kalyan did everything in his power to make her feel significant and unique. She stopped feeling like a member of a lower social class and declared, "My heart would estrange from the grave reality of my existence,"(Bala 13). She ignored her close friend's advice to stay away from Kalyan because she was lost in her own fantasy world. The situation completely changed after the marriage;

singing was no longer permitted for the girl (Banani), for whom singing meant everything. Her mother in law said,

“Stop right there, will you? You low born girl, no singing here! It is not the tradition of the Kanjilal family to have its women break into song like that! You have to maintain a certain decorum here” (15).

Here, her lovingly married husband did not stand up for her; instead, he went a step farther and requested her to stop pursuing her education. Her hopes for a beautiful future were dashed, and all at once the world flipped upside down. From that very day she was tortured, beaten again and again by her husband and her mother in law. Her body was marked with ‘scars, black, blotchy and innumerable’ (16)

The reference to the "solitary lamp post" at the opening of the story represents how it glows brightly in the darkness of the night, heightens itself from all the sufferings, and does not let any little thing to worry it as it shines bright. From Banani's window, the light post appeared to be rather close, but in reality, one must go a considerable distance and overcome several obstacles in order to get there. The lamp represented the glimmer of hope she could discover in Tumpa, her daughter. Her goal was to better educate her and position her as a doctor, not one like her father.

We can observe how miserable is the position of the women in the society which is patriarchal and segregated by caste. Despite coming from a caste that is marginalised, Banani is meticulous in cultural activities and education that serves as an emancipatory tool for the oppressed and voiceless victims, both are snatched from her.

The second story “Discrimination” by Manju Bala talks about a Santhal girl Fuliya who is treated as an untouchable at her own home.

““I want to marry Fuliya, Ma,’ Jeet said, without any further ado.

‘Who, Fuliya? How is that possible? She is a Santhal girl. Even if you make

Friends with them, you can never marry them.””(31)

The girl, Fuliya was married to Jeet, a Brahmin not with pomp and show but at the Marriage Registrar Office. Mamta Devi, her mother in law even though she accepted the marriage she could not do away with the casteist prejudices. At every step she made Fuliya realise that she belonged to lower caste.

““Just check if the rice is ready, Bouma. Pour in a mug of water if you see the water has dried up. And take care that you do not touch the pot. Lower the flame of the gas before you come.’

‘I’ll take care not to touch it”” (32)

She is considered an untouchable at her own home, where she is forbidden from touching the food once it has been prepared because doing so would contaminate it. She is abandoned and treated like an outsider in her own home; rather of being a daughter-in-law, she is a maid and an outcast. On another instance when it was the day of Fuliya’s son’s thread ceremony, someone remarked “thread ceremony for a Santhal’s son”(33), with this remark Fuliya was infuriated she had a little tiff with her husband and like a mad woman she marched up and down in the room, which shows her intolerance to the upper caste society.

The story depicts how “their life is often miserable, humiliating, and filled with daily reminders of the impurity and the pollutedness” (Limbale 13). The narrative shows the lack of compassion and the pain, suffering, enslavement, and dehumanisation that Dalit women had to undergo. It depicts the idealised picture of loss and grief.

In the third short story “The Housemaid Special” by Manju Bala. This is the tale of Ketaki, a woman compelled to work as a housekeeper who was kicked out of her in-laws' home after giving birth to a boy only eight months into her marriage. She was beaten out of the house after all of the bogus accusations were made against her.

Ketaki, born into a lower caste, manages her daily life by working as a maid. While working, the memsahib continuously abuses her, but she does not mind anymore as ‘the incessant abuses of the memsahibs have hardened them into robots’ (Bala 19). She is not allowed to ring the calling bell but gently ‘jiggle the knocker’ (19), as it would disturb the family members who were sleeping. In this scene, two very different lives are combined into one frame: Ketaki, who must go outside in the early mornings of winter to clean and provide comfort for the upper caste; and the wealthy, well-educated family she works for, who sleeps until late in the morning, enjoys a luxurious lifestyle, and mistreats the person who makes their life easier.

Her boudimoni (brother's wife) asked her where she was; disgusted that she hadn't been to her for the past four days. She explained that she was unable to come to work because of her son's condition. However, Boudimoni did not seem to be persuaded by the explanation, so she fired her and blamed it on her. Then she accused her of being a low caste by birth. Since they belong to lower caste, they are also refused good names, as if these are exclusive only to the

upper caste. As a result, Ketaki gives her son the demeaning name "Pocha," which in Bengali means "rotten".

Ketaki is completely illiterate but never lacked intelligence. She knew what it was to be blind so she was determined to educate Pocha. Pocha grew up to be a student who scored well in his subjects but still stood out from the others. On the one hand, students would make fun of his name, calling him "Alu-pocha" or "Begun-pocha." Her mother would comfort him by telling him, "When you become highly educated, when you have a big job, then they can never taunt you again" (21), at which point Pocha would stop crying. On the other hand, he would constantly be teased and humiliated for his caste:

"You know, Biplab, they pass the Joint Entrance through Reservation and become quacks and killer doctors." ... "Oh, boy, see the nincompoop has started to speak up! Arrey, you have disgraced your forefathers and left your ancestral profession; you all don't want to continue farming. Have we left our age old professions? He pulls out the sacred thread and shows it off. That's why I tell you, whatever you have learnt is enough. Now don't waste your time but go back to your village and pick up the plough" (22)

Following this specific episode, he recalls how the Bamunpishi (colloquial term for Brahmin), accused him of contaminating the pond's water simply by touching it. Pocha was punished as a result of Bamunpishi's ensuing rage. Pocha was unable to make sense of the disparity in ideas between the educated city dwellers and those ignorant, country folk. Finally in the end Pocha gets a job in a Higher Secondary school in South Kolkata and when everything is about to be

settled after a good education and a job Ketaki's dream is to be fulfilled. Pocha and his mother get the ultimate shock:

He is not allowed to sit in the teachers room ...not allowed to take classes... his drinking water is also set separate from the other teachers... He spoke out for his rights...denied justice; his mental strength just broke down. After this, one day she entered through the school's gate, random punches were hurled upon him... they were all students of the school. Later he learnt that the school has tagged him with a strange accusation: he is homosexual. (25)

This incident shatters it all, Ketaki's eyes flares up with the fresh outburst of fire. She says to Pocha, "Let's go. Time beckons; we mustn't be late..." (25) She is finally ready for the revolt in deep vengeance. She could not bear the immense pain and inhumane treatment she had to endure, which made her feel intense rage. The birthright subaltern position, which is approved by established authority, became permanent and unchangeable.

In the last short story "A Hundred Pens" by Kalyani Thakur Charal; Rekha, Gourango Gacchi's daughter makes her an able candidate to take up a job as a teacher and takes an initiative to reframe the historical narrative.

Rekha is an academically bright student, graduated from Bagula College with Bangla Honours. Soon after finishing her college she cleared the government exam for teaching position in Kolagacchi Primary School. When asked about her father's job on the day of the interview, she was hesitant to respond since she was unable to clarify that her father cut the date palms; instead, she merely said that his occupation was "cultivation."

Rekha's Thakuma (grandmother) was blind-in-one-eye, wore shabby clothes and could not walk, she couldnot afford to get a good treatment and have good everyday clothes but was curious about Rekha's school and the students over there. Despite her advanced age and lack of literacy, she was aware of her surroundings and recognised the value of education in enabling them to overcome their challenges. As most of the children in the school were 'from the Muslim neighbourhood nearby, some fisherman's children, some Bagdi and Namashudra children, and one or two Ghosh kids' (10). She asked Rekha to carry a hundred pens. She was done with the caste system prevailing in the society. Thakuma said,

"Hand one each to every child. For thousand years our people haven't been able to write-they're blind even though they have eyes. What others have written are taken to be true. To erase these thousand years of writing, everyone has to take a pen and write, dear. Tell the little darlings this when you hand them the pens" (10)

She brings upon the subjugation and the ill treatment that was meted out as a result of the caste distinction and with the 'pen as a sword' can bring change to their lives by changing the historical narratives. Subsequently, the story transports the reader to an imaginative realm devoid of gender inequality and caste. An equal society will emerge with an egalitarian outlook from the dissolution of the greatest texts. As stated, 'Wherever she stepped, blank pages emerged. The children followed her-they came armed with pens and sat on the paper and started writing a new history' (11). Therefore a new history is to be born where everyone will be treated as equal. With the pens in the hands there must be a revolution like Voltaire's literature caused a revolution, from an oppressive state the common people would be rescued from the subjugation.

It reminds one of the time when Babasaheb burned the Manu smriti because he was only of the opinion that Dalits have been brought down into abject poverty as a result of the text's teachings. Babasaheb felt that literature should not only promote social and human progress but also foster human values.

Conclusion

The classical principles of aesthetics Satyam (truth), Shivam (goodness), and Sundaram (beauty)—are deliberately interrogated and, in many respects, subverted in Dalit literature. The narratives foreground the lived experiences of marginalized individuals, revealing the stark realities of social oppression. Banani, for instance, is subjected to relentless physical abuse and psychological torment, ultimately culminating in her tragic death. Fuliya, designated an untouchable, is perceived as a polluted presence even within the confines of her own home. Ketaki is expelled after being falsely accused of adultery, while her son endures constant caste-based humiliation and physical violence at the hands of the upper caste. Rekha and her grandmother, having lived lives marked by persistent degradation and marginalization, envision a world in which love, equality, and freedom from caste- and gender-based hierarchies prevail.

In this context, Dalit writing actively challenges conventional aesthetic paradigms. Unlike traditional literature, which often seeks primarily to entertain or provide aesthetic pleasure, Dalit literature is ethically engaged and life-affirming, compelling readers to confront the imperatives of equality, justice, liberty, and human fraternity. Sharan Kumar Limbale articulates this reconfiguration of aesthetic values with striking clarity: “Human beings are the first and foremost human—this is Satyam; the liberation of human beings is Shivam; and the

humanity of human beings is Sundaram.” Here, aesthetics is inseparable from social consciousness and moral commitment.

Dalit literature is thus characterized by revolt and rejection—a literary praxis aimed at exposing structural inequities and advocating transformative social change. It foregrounds the systemic injustices that define caste, gender, and class hierarchies, positioning literature not merely as an instrument of artistic expression but as a vehicle for societal critique and humanistic reform. In doing so, it reconceptualizes the very purpose of aesthetics, aligning literary value with ethical engagement and social responsibility.

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