

Beyond the Boundary of Caste and Gender: Re-Viewing Identity Politics of Dalit Women in Post-Colonial Era through Select Bengali Dalit Short Stories

Shrabana Adhikari

Senior Research Fellow

Department of English

Gujarat University

shrabana.adhikari@gujaratuniversity.ac.in

Shrabana0096@gmail.com

ORCID ID- 0009-0008-4382-7450

Abstract

This research article will identify the psychological struggle and social oppression of three Dalit women and explore the fact that intricate identity politics becomes weakened through their dismantling of the traditional roles and beliefs associated with the Dalit community in three Dalit texts: “A Hundred Pens” by Kalyani Thakur Charal, “Conflict” by Manju Bala, “An Outcaste” by Ratna Ray. Through this intriguing discussion, this paper will also try to present an account of caste discrimination, gender bias, and socio – political condition of Dalit women in the post-colonial era and how the protagonists (Rekha Gachchhi, Banani, the narrator herself) of these three texts subvert the notion of untouchability and question the inhuman treatment of the dominant class towards Dalits. Where is the end of this untouchability? Even after independence, the condition of the Dalit people remains predominantly the same as in ancient times. Although these three women protagonists suffer from self-doubt, indecision, and humiliation, all of them fought for their basic human rights and search for emancipation beyond the hierarchy of caste and gender. Their identity crisis leads to their existential dilemma as a human being. Moreover, this paper would argue how the three female protagonists reshape their own identities through the lens of Dalit Feminist theory and post-colonial intervention. The stories of these three women have three different perspectives of dealing with the issues of inequity, exploitation and prejudice thrust upon them by the upper-caste people in the name of establishing a so-called civilized society. The article will uncover these various nuances of the intersectional identity crisis of these women through in-depth textual interpretations.

Keywords: Dalit women, Dalit feminism, Caste, Gender, Identity, Marginalization, Post-Colonialism, Socio-Political condition.

INTRODUCTION

In an eminent Bengali ISSN journal called *Nispolok*, Debi Chatterjee, in her article called “The Educational Revolution of Marginalized people: Contribution of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule”, has very significantly pointed out the grim reality at the very outset: “Indian society is Brahmanical, caste-based and patriarchal since ancient time” (Chatterjee 68). She has elaborately explained the co-existence of diversity of Indian social system and the discrimination of people based on their caste. The gradual evolution and progress of societal norms fail to address the crisis of those who were considered as ‘unholy’ and to restore their human rights. The concept of Unholiness has been associated with the Sudras or Dalits down the ages.

Another distinguished Indian sociologist and feminist scholar Sharmila Rege in her book *Writing Caste Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (2006) refers to the origin of the term Dalit: “Babasaheb Ambedkar had coined the word ‘dalit’ in 1928 in his writings in *Bahiskrit Bharat* and the concept of dalit literature came to be accepted by the 1950s.” (12). She has justifiably mentioned the contribution of great Dalit rights activist Kancha Illiah to clarify the positionality of the dalits in postcolonial context: “Scholars like Illiah have argued that dalit bahujans alienated both from the post-colonial Indian state and dominant Hindutva politics ...” (Rege 41).

Rege also refers to the remarkable Indian social reformer Savitribai Phule’s contribution in the dalit literary movement and the progress of dalit women in general:

Savitribai Phule’s letters reveal an acute consciousness of the relationship between Knowledge and power and the crucial need for democratic access to knowledge for shudras and women. In a letter to Jotiba Phule written in 1868, she reports her support to the marriage of a mahar woman and Brahman man who the villagers were stoning to death (46).

Rege also argues that issues of 'caste identity' and 'caste consciousness' became the central part of discussion in political theoretical context during 1980s. She also refers to the two distinct divisions of feminism proposed by the Dalit Bahujan feminist leaders- 'brahmani and abrahmani'. In 1980s and 1990s various autonomous feminist foundations like 'Mahila Sansad' and 'Dalit Stree Sahitya Mancha' were formed which contribute to the radicalization in Dalit feminist discourse and these bodies challenge the brahmanical ideologies and patriarchal oppression of dalit women (84). She also explains the intersectional suppression of these marginalized women whose exclusive positionality marked a sudden blow at the traditional feminist canonical discussion. She examined how hegemonical structure is ingrained within power dynamics of society. She mentioned an essay, written by Muktabai, one of the students of Phule. This critical essay asserted that Phule gave immense importance to the education of dalit women and it was considered as 'third eye' (Tritiya Ratna) that helped to question the injustices and repressive nature of society (87).

Although India had been declared as a secular country in 1947 and even after the implementation of constitution in 1950 the black shadow of untouchability still exists in this largest democratic Indian society where caste is to be considered as one of the controllers of the lives of the people. Moreover, what is more surprising is that in spite of being a country of diversity in various aspects like culture, religion, tradition and language, Indian society is divided hierarchically depending on the varna system (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra) which excludes Dalit. The particular term 'Dalit' does not indicate only the scheduled casts. The eminent Marathi Dalit writer activist Sharankumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (2004) writes-

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses, and the nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes, People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included. (30)

Dalit literature has an inherent connection with Dalit movement as these people have been exploited for a long time and they are deprived of their basic rights to live a decent life. The

voice of these people has been suppressed by the upper caste people since Rig Vedic period. The prevalence of caste system in ancient era and its roots have been explained by Raj Kumar in his book *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019). He writes, “The Aryan theory thus seems to involve several points: that Aryans came from outside and subjugated the indigenous people; that they destroyed the pre-existing Indus-civilization; and that the upper caste descended from Aryans and the lower Castes, including Shudras and Dalits, from the darker skinned non-Aryans” (19).

After emerging in Maharashtra in early period of 1970s, Dalit literature spreads its wings in various regions like Karnatak, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Odisha and Bengal. The first conference of Dalit literature was held in 1958 by Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in Maharashtra where Dalit literature attained a distinct position in the field of literature. The notable figure Jyotirao Phule left an important mark during the colonial and post- colonial period in the field of Dalit literature through his masterpiece *Gulamgiri* (1873). Simultaneously, the Dalit movement gained a major turning point with the contribution of Dr. B.R Ambedkar who fought for equal social, political, cultural and economic rights of this subjugated class.

In the book, *Dalit Lekhika Women's Writings from Bengal* (2020) in the Introductory part of Dalit Literature, Sayantan Dasgupta explains the influence of Babasaheb: “the Dalit movement ...gained momentum in the 1920s under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar with the burning of Manusmriti, agitation for the right to use ponds and wells reserved for caste Hindus, and so on.” (Charal Dasgupta xviii). He called for anti-caste movements and he was very much concerned about the empowerment of women as it is evident from his writings and speeches. In 1942, in the Second All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference he emphasized the issue of women empowerment. In her article “B.R. Ambedkar and Women Empowerment”, Kanika Dubey also refers to the speech of Ambedkar who thought that the progress of a community can only be measured by ‘the degree of progress which women have achieved’ (Dubey 10829). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also used the term brahmanical patriarchy to explain the ingrained inequality in Indian society and he called patriarchy as the twin sister of Brahmanism. The eminent theorist Gopal Guru emphasizes the fact in the article ‘Dalit Women talk differently’ that dalit women suffer ‘on the basis of external factors and internal factors’ (Guru 2548).

Sara Sindhu Thomas in her book chapter entitled “Witnessing And Experiencing Dalitness In defence of Dalit women’s Testimonios” included in the book *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshi K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, highlights the doubly marginalized state of dalit women: “The double marginalization status was accorded to them in literature too, which eventually propelled Dalit Women to write about their experiences” (Thomas 248). Dalit Women stay in margins of margins. Their voice has been suppressed not only by the men of their caste but also by the Indian patriarchal society. In another book chapter entitled “Literatures of Suffering and Resistance Dalit Women’s Testimonios and Black women slave narratives – a comparative study”, Arpita Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay draws a parallel discussion between Black Women and Dalit women by pointing to the similarities and differences in experiencing the oppression. On one hand, Black women suffer from sense of ‘lost homeland’, on the other, Dalit women suffer because of sense of ‘Other’ or ‘peripheral’ in their own country (Mukhopadhyay 262).

This particular research article will also explain the harrowing experiences of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular in the postcolonial period. Even after independence, the Indian society was not free from caste-based discrimination which made the lives of lower -class people hellish. Caste, like an evil spirit, plays the role of colonizer who always makes an effort to colonize the marginalized people and to captivate them inside the shackles of orthodox and prejudices down the ages. In this context, Raj Kumar mentions Kancha Illiah in his book *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019): “In post-colonial India, in the name of Congress democratic rule, the Hindus came to Power both at Delhi and at provincial headquarters. Parliamentary democracy in essence became brahmanical democracy” (37).

The present article concentrates on analyzing the identity crisis of Dalit women who are subdued on the basis of class, caste and gender since colonial period and in the post-colonial era through select Bengali Dalit short stories. Dalit literature in Bengal which was known as Matua Sahitya (19th century) was immensely influenced by two pioneer figures Harichand Biswas and his son Guruchand Biswas. Some important works like *Namasudra Darpan* (1909) by Rashbihari Ray, *Namasudra Dwijatitattwa* (1911) by Shashikumar Barui Biswas, *Namasudra Gyanbhandar* by Balaram Sarkar can be considered as the crucial pillars of Bengali Dalit Literature. The contemporary writers are Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin

Bala, Manju Bala, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Anil Gharai, Amita Bagchi etc. Bengali Dalit writers portray their day-to-day experience in their writings which bear the scars of their sufferings, pain, frustration, and affliction.

In his article “Is There Dalit Writing In Bangla”, Manoranjan Byapari, an eminent dalit activist has meticulously described the emergence and progressions of Bengali Dalit Literature as a unique corpus in Bangla Sahitya. In the initial part of his article, Byapari sarcastically refers to the negligence in the attitude of Bengali upper caste people who almost deny the prevalence of caste oppression in Bengal and hence they thought that there was no need to ‘raise voices of resistance’ (Byapari 1). He explains the after-effects of partition on dalit refugees and on the advancement of dalit literature in Bengal. Before this historical event, in 1940s many dalit journals like- *Namasudra*, *Sadhak* were published from East Bengal. In late 1960s and 1970s more journals came out - *Nabaarun*, *Nabarupa*, *Bahujan Darpan*, *Bharatbasi*, *Samaj Chetana* and *Purba Bharat*. In 1987, Bangiya Dalit Lekhak Parisad (Bengali Dalit Writers’ Association) was formed by Nakul Mallick. In 1990s, other journals like *Dalit Kantho*, *Neel Akash*, *Adal Badal*, *Ajker Ekalavaya* came out. The important dalit women writer Manju Bala consistently edits the journal called *Ekhan Takhan* since 1996 (Byapari 4118). He has made a catalogue of every genre of literature in his article which plays crucial role in forming the shape of Bengali Dalit Literature in the then society. He has referred to many short stories like- “*Anya Yehudi* and *Madhumanti onek dur* by Kapil Krishna Thakur and *Aakash, Mati, Mon* by Bimalendu Halder and *Biplober Maa* by Dharendra Nath Mallick”. The anthology entitled *Chaturtha Duniyar Golpo Sankalan* included dalit writings from Bangladesh, West Bengal and Tripura (Byapari 4119).

Manohar Mouli Biswas terms Bengali Dalit Literature as a ‘consolidated movement’ and present as an antithetical force that questions brahmanical supremacy. To him, Bengali Dalit literature is a ‘revolutionary activism’ which is the need of the hour for bringing a radical change in our society. Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha was formed to create a historical, social and cultural space for Dalits. Kalyani Thakur Charal publishes a magazine called *Neer* where she writes about the oppression of Dalit women.

In a book chapter entitled “Feminism and the Matua Faith”, included in the book *Matua Religion and Society A Socio-Political Analysis And Some Related Essays*, (edited by Debi Chatterjee and Sipra Mukherjee) Manohar Mouli Biswas, an eminent Bengali Dalit writer has significantly drawn a comparison between Dalit women and the oppression of Afro -American Black women. He specifically discusses about the positionality of Dalit women in the context of Bengal. He argues that although these downtrodden people suffer from economic crisis, Matua women played a vital role in social and religious arena. He refers to the fact that the founding father of Matua religion Sri Sri Harichand Thakur instructed his followers to be ‘one woman’ centric. In their societal system, polygamy and adultery were considered as heinous act (Biswas 117).

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminism as a theoretical discourse upholds gender inequality and various socio-political issues. There is a gap between mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit feminism. Feminism in general fails to provide a more comprehensive picture of class and caste discrimination of Dalit women. In this context, Kalyani Thakur Charal draws similarity between the black women in Africa who also suffered from racial discrimination in Africa and Dalit women, in the introductory part of the book *Poems of Chandalini* and she gives more value to the word ‘womanism’:

As a perspective emerging specifically from the everyday experiences of Black Women, Womanism strives to end all manners of oppression for all people globally. Unlike, Feminism that specifically targets gender and sexism, woman speaks to and against all forms of discrimination on grounds of race, class, caste, gender, sexuality, environment, health, nutrition, disability etc. (Mitra Sarangi 4)

In the seminal book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin attempt to draw a comparison between feminism and post-colonialism in this way, “But like post- colonial criticism, feminist criticism has now turned away from such simple towards questioning of forms and modes, to unmasking the assumptions upon which such canonical constructions are founded, moving first to make their cryptic bases visible and then to destabilize them” (173).

In her pioneering essay “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”, published in the “Economic and Political Weekly”, Sharmila Rege has specified the three phases of development of feminist theory - First World Feminism, Black Feminism and Saidian framework in feminism. White feminists did not consider the issues of racism of black women. On the contrary, black women were only conscious of race and gender issues. The category of caste only belongs to Dalit women (Rege 40).

Dalit women are subdued by the upper caste people but as well as by the people of their own community. The caste and gender axis formulates complex identity of dalit women which bears multiple dimensions. The singular perception of identity of dalit women has been dismantled by the mutual exclusiveness of caste, gender, class and religion. The outburst of their sufferings is expressed through their autobiographical works and other writings. The autobiographical writings make a topsy-turvy of the symbols that represent their untouchable condition. Sharankumar Limbale in his autobiographical work *The Outcaste* (2003) upholds the inhumane oppression of dalit women in the hands of upper -caste men. In *Joothan*, Om Prakash Valmiki points out the need of education of Dalit women. Gunasekaran describes Dalit cultural identity which presents the fact that dalit women can liberate themselves through their creative self and they can resist the victimhood. Moreover, Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama’s *Karukku*, Kalyani Thakur Charal’s *Ami Keno Charal Likhi (Why I Write Charal as My Name)* show the transformation of Dalit women’s struggle and the evolution of dalit feminist perspectives. In her article ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’ Sharmila Rege has clearly presented the standpoint of Dalit Women –

It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women’s standpoint is multiple, heterogenous- such a recognition underlines the fact that dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality – all construct each other (Rege 45).

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework emerged in late 1980s and 1990s. This theory came into academia with Kimberle Crenshaw’s seminal work ‘*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality*,

Identity politics and Violence Against Women of Colour. It rejects the single representation of single identity and it is the cross section of gender, race and class.

In the book chapter, “Why Intersectionality is Necessary” S. J. Aloysius and J.P. Mangubhai and J.G. Lee included in the book *Dalit Feminist Theory A Reader* (2019), edited by Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore argues, “The end product of the assimilation of patriarchal caste ideology by Dalit, and women in particular, is a situation in which Dalit subgroups are considered ‘jatis’ falling within the overall framework of the hierarchical caste order” (174). Besides, in the above-mentioned book, in her essay, “Ambedkarite Women”, Wandana Sonalkar refers to the identity crisis of dalit women and dalit politics: “Identity politics is also a part of politics; the creation of new symbols, icons and celebrations lays claim to cultural space” (89).

Gopal Guru in his essay, *Dalit Women Talk Differently*, published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, highlights the three aspects of dalit feminism. These are:

1. Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them.
2. The experience of Dalit women shows that local resistance within Dalits is important.
3. It is not only caste and class identity but also one’s gender positioning that decides the validity of an event. (Guru 2589)

DISCUSSION

In her short story “A Hundred Pens”, (Bengali version *Lekhoni*) Kalyani Thakur Charal talks about the emancipation of a dalit woman protagonist Rekha Gachchi who becomes economically independent and shows a new path to the children belonging to the dalit community through education. Rekha was born in a poor and lower middle class Namashudra family. Although her father and grandmother were illiterate, she did her graduation in Bangla and secured a job. She became a primary school teacher. She became successful of creating her own identity above her caste, class and religion. In her interview, she could not mention that her father’s occupation is cutting of date palm trees to extract juice, so she simply said cultivation is his occupation.

Rekha's grandmother was blind-in-one-eye, but she was very much conscious of the importance of education in their life. 'A hundred pens' is actually symbolic of light of education from which the people of their community are deprived of down the ages. So, her grandmother asked her to give a hundred pens to each child in the school – "For thousands of years our people haven't been able to write – they're blind even though they have eyes. To erase those thousand years of writing, everyone has to take a pen and write, dear" (Charal 3).

When the grandmother asked Rekha how many students are there in her school, Rekha mentioned that there were students belonged to various communities like Muslims, fisherman, Bagdi, Namasudra etc. The most paradoxical fact in this short story is that whereas the upper caste people always try to prevent so called Dalit people from getting education, here Rekha's grandmother asked her to treat every child equally irrespective of their caste, class and religion. In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi and Bidisha Pal, Kalyani Thakur Charal refers to the poignant incident which creates commotion in the arena of Dalit Literature:

Chuni Kotal was a student of Vidyasagar University of West Bengal. She was also a promising poet. She belonged to the Sabar community. But she had to commit suicide unfortunately in the year 1992 at a very tender age owing to caste discriminations

Her death was an influencing factor for initiating the Dalit literary movement and setting up the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha or The Literary Association of Bengali Dalits (Charal-4- Sarangi-Pal).

Education is a basic right which should be given to all irrespective of their caste, class and race. She is also hopeful of the fact that Rekha will be the ideal teacher and become the guiding star of the people of her community. Conquering all the odds in her life, she finally emerges as an idol. In another interview with Debdatta Chakrabarty and Sarbani Banerjee, in the context of empowerment of dalit women, Kalyani Thakur Charal emphasizes the utmost importance and crucial role of education in enlightening the minds of the marginalized women who can have achieved equity if they get proper education-

Dalit women will realize they have reached a place of empowerment the day they overcome all

obstacles, gain education, and become empowered to help other women come forward. I think that when Dalit women become socially, economically, educationally, and politically

empowered and can show the way to ten more women from the marginalized section to come forward in society, then it can be said that they are empowered (Chakrabarty & Banerjee 234).

In her short story, "Conflict", Manju Bala portrays the fierce sufferings and death of Banani, a colony girl who married Kalyan, a doctor and dreamt of a happy family life. Banani was an educated woman and she could sing very well. Before their marriage, Kalyan promised her that she will continue her studies and singing in future. The scenario gets changed when Kalyan married her. Her passion for singing has been smashed and her dream of pursuing M.A. has been shattered. Her mother-in-law strictly forbade to live according to her choices and she was treated inhumanely by her husband and mother-in-law. She explained it to her friend Swapna, "Swapna, my whole body is marked with scars, black, blotchy and innumerable. They are tokens of my husband's love, my mother-in-law's care for me. I could not listen to them. I could not stay away from music. They hit me. Kalyan is no longer Kalyan I fell in love with!" (16). She was forced to quit her singing and higher studies and become an obedient housewife. Her mother-in-law vehemently attacked her as 'low born girl' when she started to practice singing in the morning. She also mocks at the quality of Banani and forbids her to sing as this was not the tradition of their Brahmin family. Her mother-in-law bursts out: "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). These words pierced her heart. She was always put into the corner by her mother-in-law for her caste. By uttering these words, her mother-in-law in a way demeans the art form and it also reveals the spiteful nature of so-called upper caste people. She also implores to her husband to continue her studies and zeal for singing but her husband strictly instructed her to become a good housewife instead of pursuing her dreams. This is another great blow on psyche of Banani. She gets disillusioned with the fanciful ideas of married life. She was utterly disheartened when her husband strictly forbade her to continue her studies and singing- "How is that possible, Kalyan? Music flows in my veins! It is my very being! How am I let it go? Wasn't it my singing that attracted you?" (16). After their marriage, Kalyan mistreated Banani and she was stripped off human rights and she was not given respect as a woman or as a wife. In her poem "Barred", included in the book *Dalit Lekhika Women's Writings from Bengal*, Manju Bala overtly refers to the dismantling of dreams of lower

caste people by the elite class. Their wishes are shattered by those who are ‘powerful, high-by-birth’ (Bala 25). Shoma Sen in her article entitled “The village and the city: Dalit Feminism in the autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar”, critiques the way state neglects its responsibility in post-independent Indian scenario towards the Dalit people. It also examines how the ‘Brahmanical Culture’ of the upper caste people became powerful tool and emblematic of highest authority which is guided by bigotry and hegemonic structure (Sen, 2019). This caste discrimination is also highlighted by Bama in her interview with Jaydeep Sarangi. Though she specially points out her experience as a low caste woman in Tamil Nadu, this scenario prevails in every part of India: “Each caste tries to dominate and suppress the other below it. Not only from womb to tomb, but even after one’s death caste follows and segregates- even in the graves. Stratification of caste is faced at every level- education, employment, religion, marriage, everywhere” (Bama-3-Sarangi).

Banani was helpless and panic stricken. The person whom she loved once turned into a ruthless, brutal one and tortured her. Kalyan did not protest against this barbarous torture of his mother. He ordered Banani to accept whatever his mother instructed her to do and to take responsibility of household duties rather than chasing her dream of becoming an independent woman. So, it creates mental distance between them. Is this the culture of a so called educated high class family? Why Banani will have to sacrifice her dream? Is this because she is a colony girl? Here, Banani is caught in an in between space which according to Bhabha is the split, decentered unstable and resistant one. The answers remain vague as Banani died. Her death created mystery. The death of Banani became a shock for her little daughter Tumpa. Someone told her that her mother had got burnt because of explosion of stoves. The young daughter suffers from traumatic memories after the death of Banani. She recalls that ominous day- “Her mother’s body was blackened and scorched. One glance at her face, and Tumpa broke into tears. Perhaps, that disfigured face had scared her” (17). Later, she realized that her father and grandmother did such heinous act of murder. This murder not only signifies the piteous ending of Banai’s life, it also hints at the ending of hope, dreams of a woman belonging to lower caste and egalitarianism.

Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2002), clearly mentions the relationship between class and caste: “Class, caste and gender are inextricably

linked with and shape each other; the structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction is the fundamental basis of caste system” (13).

In “An Outcaste”, Ratna Ray, directly attacks the hierarchy of caste system and her unnamed narrator becomes the mouthpiece of Namashudra community. At the very beginning of the story, the protagonist, a girl, was bullied by her upper caste friends when she was at a boarding school far away from her village. In her school, the anonymous protagonist was mocked at and humiliated because of her caste. When her friends were repeatedly stinging her at the hostel to know in which particular sub caste she belonged to, the protagonist asserts bluntly: “I answered I was a Namashudra.” (45) She was neither afraid nor ashamed of accepting the reality of the caste based Indian Society where the Dalit women are also exploited by the upper caste women. The double marginalization of Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender always complicate the issue of their identity crisis. However, her friend Jaya refuted her by saying: “You don’t look like a Namashudra girl at all. Everybody else in your family also looks quite good – how did this happen!” (45). The way her friend was surprised to hear the truth, it is as if she has been committed a heinous crime as she was born in a Namashudra family. Though she boldly accepted her roots, she could not give vent to her internal bleeding: “I felt a lump in my throat; it was as if my eyes were ready to ooze blood in place of tears. Within a few hours I had become an outcaste to them” (45).

After her marriage, the narrator settled at Krishnanagar with her husband and only son. There she frequently visited the house of an elderly couple whose only son lived abroad and they forget their loneliness while spending time with the son of the narrator. In the meanwhile, the narrator was surprised and felt insecure when the old woman indirectly asked about their caste but she promptly answered: “I replied- we are humans”. (46). In this particular context, the renowned Tamil Dalit feminist writer Bama Faustina Soosairaj in her interview with Jaydeep Sarangi clearly expresses her own view – “For a dalit woman, her struggle, her priority is to assert and establish her humanity more than her femininity”.

The narrator could not show this boldness next time when the elderly couple again asked her about the caste she replied- ‘Vaishnav.’ She did not want to lose the company and intense love of the elderly couple. She suffered from pangs of conscience and she confessed that to her own self: “My only identity was that I was a human being. But I could never say the same to

Mashima. That was my weakness” (47). She asked God to forgive her and She replied when she was again asked for her caste- “Vaishnav- I replied. I became a Vaishnav in my mind from then on. I asked for forgiveness from God for lying a respectable elderly woman. I consoled myself saying that I did not lie willingly, and that from the very beginning all I had wanted was to be a human being” (47).

The identity of a person cannot be judged on the basis of complexion, physique, caste, class or religion. The narrator of this story failed to break the lens through which the old lady and old man visualized her. The narrator did not want to lose the love of them. They were very close to their heart. The beautiful relationship between them could have been destroyed if they knew she belonged to Namashudra community. What is also important to note that, the marginalized woman could not able to establish humanitarian values. Finally, she also succumbed to the societal rules and power relations. It also suggests the fact that she was forced to suppress her voice and she was guilty for telling lies related to her caste. However, her pangs of conscience led her not to fight against this caste discrimination. She accepted her fate silently only to get affection and care from the elderly upper caster couple. If, she could protest against this narrow mindedness, she would have been able to become the voice of the oppressed class. She could not overcome her psychological conflict to face the reality. This is because, in her early age, when she firmly declared to her classmates that she belonged to Namashudra community, they did not trust her words because of her complexion. They anticipated that it was not possible that she is a low-born girl. But when the protagonist asserted that she belonged to lower caste, they treated her such a way that she got hurt. Her painful memory prevented her to tell truth later.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, three stories bear three different perspectives of the struggle of the three dalit woman protagonist. They fought against the patriarchal oppression and prejudices and some of them finally succumb to the prescribed codes of society. The intersectional oppression of Dalit women is significant. The three stories portray the gradual transformation of the women protagonists. These women characters search for their own identity within the caste- based society. Their attempt to attain emancipation through self- realization has been appropriately depicted by the writers. The double marginalization of these women add more nuances to their

excruciating pain. These women are devoid of human rights, dignity and justice. Their struggle is not only the societal norms but also against the animosity of their own people. These three stories depict three different ways of exploitation of the dalit women. The first one points out the primary cause of regression of these women- i.e. lack of education. The light of education is essential to uplift their mind as well their socioeconomic and sociopolitical condition. The second story suggests the hypocrisy and hollowness of snobby upper caste people. It shows how the voice of a low caste women is being suppressed and how her life is threatened even if she is highly educated and aspires to become independent. The third story projects completely another scenario. It upholds the helplessness of a Namashudra girl and how she is compelled to hide her true identity only for the sake of acceptance and unconditional love from the elder ones belonging to upper caste. These three short stories are three mirrors which reflect various kinds of subjugation which problematizes the ontological entity of the dalit women. It also reinterprets the triple marginalization of these protagonists- as dalit, as a woman and as a human being.

The other genres like autobiographies are the testament of the crisis of their daily life and poetry also bears the scar of their inner self. Raju Das, a great Dalit dramatist also becomes the voice of Dalit community through his writings. The caste system is so deeply rooted in our society, in the mind of the people that this rebellion for bringing a radical change in society will always be there. The gender and caste-based inequalities in India is a permanent issue which the mainstream Indian feminism refuses to consider. The scholarly critics draw a comparison between the repression of Afro- American women and dalit women. But the mainstream feminist theorists are obsessed with their own interpretation of social, economic, political oppression of women. The yardstick of class and caste have not been evaluated by them.

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