



UNDER THE YOKE: REPRESENTATION OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN SELECT DALIT FICTION

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ABSTRACT



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The anthology of short stories selected for analysis in this paper is titled ***Survival and Other Stories (2012)***. The work has been edited by Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya and is a collection of Bengali Dalit Fiction in translation. Certain stories which throw light on the changing perspectives of Dalit Literature and emerging consciousness have been selected and studied in detail. To better understand the complex concept of the term 'minority' it is crucial to understand the manifold undercurrents that accompany it. Different locales provide that element of vitality and alternate manifestations of the same intrinsic problems that distress the communities. According to Lawrence Venuti, a leading Translation theorist, the term minority can be defined to mean "a cultural or political position that is subordinate, whether the social context that defines it is local, national or global. This position is occupied by languages and literatures that lack prestige or authority, the non standard and the non- canonical, what is not spoken or read much by a hegemonic culture. Yet minorities also include the nations and social groups that are affiliated with these languages and literatures, the politically weak or underrepresented, the colonized and the disenfranchised, the exploited and the stigmatized. The terms "majority" and "minority" are relative, depending on one another for their definition and always dependent on a historically existing, even if changing situation". This definition rather aptly sums up the Dalit situation in India.

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The problems imposed on the marginalized by the monolithic caste-ridden hierarchy; the bloody carnage that is the result of outspoken rebellion, the looming shadows of starvation, shameful humiliation and the threat of sexual exploitation are all dealt with in the stories with a certain degree of raw fury which makes itself heard even after the occasional

mitigation that is a part of translation. The clichéd phrase "Lost in translation", does not hold water in this particular scenario simply because care has been taken to ensure the complete revelation of the subtle nuances in every story.

Though it is indeed an uphill task to put into words the exact sense of the utter degradation and



sully suffering by the Dalits, the translators have made the translation logical and in sync with the values and idioms of the target language. The bias against the Dalits being long-standing and the caste system being a monolith of massive proportions; it is next to impossible to find a pertinent, candid and political account of the dehumanization endured by the dalits in various literary works. However since the history of marginalization and exploitation is irretrievably true and can be observed even in the globalised India of today, translation serves as the only means to create an awareness of the issues, build solidarity across languages, bridge the gap between the under-privileged and the privileged and bring about an end to the power struggle, thereby restoring harmony and unity in the country. Hailed as 'untouchables' for vague and flimsy reasons by the law-makers in the traditional Varna system, the Dalits have for long been the 'crushed' group, forced to do menial labour which was often back-breaking and disease-causing in nature and were supposed to exist on meagre wages. For over a thousand years or perhaps even more, Dalits have been culturally marginalized, socially ostracized and economically exploited to the benefit of the social elite. The term 'dalit' is today, a broad umbrella term indifferently employed to cover or refer to the nomads or gypsies, the scheduled tribes and castes or the adivasis, the peasants, labourers, converts and other lower castes who posed a threat to the supremacy of the upper-class, Hindu Brahmin in a national and political scenario. They were thus alienated and any possibility of establishing an identity for them was demolished to ensure the survival of the elite and to perpetuate the slavery imposed by the caste hierarchy. Working as scavengers, carrying basket loads of human waste set the basis of the stigma of 'untouchability' which became the attendant of every Dalit. That sin committed in a previous life led to birth in a lower social order and the steadfast belief in reincarnation also contributed to the social marginalization of the Dalits. Untouchability however did not prevent the upper caste men from lusting after and molesting lower caste women, though they shied away from sharing food and water with them. All of this finds

expression in the anthology with fine details being etched in with master strokes on a real life canvas.

Poverty, exploitation and oppression worked as powerful defining forces to bring about what Dr. Pashupati Prasad Mahato, a staunch campaigner for Dalit Rights refers to as "cultural silence", which according to him demolished personality and creativity in the Dalit clusters and ethnic groups. Once enslaved in the vicious coil of oppression, they were forced to think and act according to the whims and fancies of the dominant groups, thus completing the process of subjugation and ensuring a state of perpetual slavery for the lower castes and strengthening the existing imbalance in the power structure. From the stories it is evident that the many-sided oppression of the Dalits has been justified by the upper caste Hindus as being sanctioned by the Holy Scriptures and this makes the position of the Dalit unstable even though there is no additional ordeal of a pseudo-scientific theory to back the claim. Yet religion has imposed a major stranglehold on the Dalit and has been tainted by the elite to suit their own purposes.

Today many Dalits look back with a sense of quiet pride as they pay homage to the suffering, self-abasement and martyrdom of their ancestors during their revolts against tyranny. Thus dalitisation can be seen as a two way process; the first would be to take pride in the knowledge that one is a dalit thereby rising above the exploitation and ostracism and proclaiming with impunity the power of a dalit and the second would be to negate the very concept of such a demarcation and to consider the grim reminders of exploitation and violence as a mark of indelible shame. The various stories in the selection are examples of the different aspects of dalitisation. Some stories deal with healing and redemption from the churning wheels of oppression while others deal with the pathos of being crushed under the juggernaut of superior might in the form of the upper class elite. The term 'dalit' carries with it the weight of the spirit of rebellion and is associated with the movement to acquire legal rights, political opportunity, cultural liberation and economic independence. The aim of Dalit literature in itself is to make the Dalit society alert to its humiliation, transform the social order and to ensure the arrival of



social integrity and equality. Studying Dalit literature is not about merely analyzing the intellectual roots of Dalit writing as in evaluating the works of ruidas (a cobbler), kabir (a weaver) and Tukaram (a tanner) says Indranil Acharya, it is about coming to terms with the convoluted plots hatched by the dominant Brahminical social order to crush any possibility of protest and the ensuing trauma it inflicts on the Dalits themselves. According to S.P. Singha and I. Acharya, "Dalit consciousness is the soul of Dalit Literature .Its identity lies in its very dalit-ness, in its commitment to the Dalit cause , in its pledge to transform the structure of society ".

In spite of undesirable arguments such as Dalit literature being highly incomplete because it does not go with the standards of the established critical modes, that it is mere propaganda and negative in content and nature, and in fact several more criticisms in the same vein, it is undeniable that Dalit literature forms of a vital part of the Indian literary pantheon. People have even accused it of being univocal in expression, but it is safe to assume that such opinions are simply the outcome of a long entrenched bias. There are many who not only sympathize but also empathize with the Dalit situation and can delineate the humiliation and suffering undergone by the Dalits under the yoke of a hegemonic caste hierarchy with a great deal of precision.

The present anthology has been based on the hypothesis that Dalit Literature is not a monolithic whole but one which is full of regional variations depending on the size and scale of the Dalit movements that transpired at different times in various parts of the nation. Though untouchability was a major issue in Bengal, it never came under the microscope due to several socio-political reasons. Yet the concerted efforts of people like Jyotirao Phule, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Dr. B.R Ambedkar led to a change in the plight of the hitherto suppressed people. Raicharan Biswas, who published *Jatiya Jagaran* (1921), (National Awakening), a volume of fiery poetry, generated awareness against hegemony and exploitation. Later on the *Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha* was established in 1992 by Prof. Achintya Biswas as its president to promote Dalit culture and literature and nullify the

superstitions attached to them. The quarterly *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World) was started to draw attention to the plight of the denizens of the fourth world, the have-nots who die from starvation and thirst and who suffer from illiteracy, exploitation, and humiliation. The basic tenets of the pledge taken at the All India Dalit Writers' Conference (1987) held in Hyderabad were one, that Dalit literature would be a lighthouse for the liberation of the dalits, two, that in the social field Dalit writers would fight against casteism, communalism, bigotry and all kinds of discrimination, three, that they would wage war against Feudalism and capitalism and ultimately in all their endeavors they would try to destroy cultural hegemony to strengthen the foundations of education and culture.

According to A. K Ramanujan, "When we read a translated work, we need to attend carefully both to the uniqueness of cultural expression and to the universal elements in it both to its Otherness and to its challenge to our ability to share it "Translation into English though difficult as mentioned earlier has its advantages in that English is democratic and heterogeneous and even offers ample space for the inclusion of regional terms and is indeed helpful to provide entry into the world of power and knowledge. The stories in the anthology edited by S.P. Singha and I. Acharya vary in theme, locale and characterization and are therefore perfect examples of the cultural variety which is so crucial when it comes to appraising Dalit literature. The common thread that runs through all of them is the poignant rendering of previously neglected ethnic groups and the various vicissitudes in their lives. The traditionalist, literary ethos of typical Bengali literature is eons apart from these sordid tales of exploitation and misery. In the selected work, there is the sharp, agonizing realization of the subaltern's pain delineated with an acute awareness of the Dalit consciousness.

The story *Fisherman*, by Uttampada Bijali , translated by Snehasis Maiti relates the wretchedness of a group of fishermen who brood on the helplessness of their plight. Though they all belong to the lower social order, they are uneasily conscious of the fine lines of distinction between the sub-castes that forces them to look down on each other once



they reach the shore. But on the sea far away from the confines of a rigid caste-bound society, where there is a looming threat of imminent death hanging over their heads, they stand united. They become brothers-in-arms ready to listen to each others' tales of woe and die for each other if need be. These otherwise hapless marginals in their harsh struggle for survival against a capricious marine adversary suddenly experience enlightenment. They understand that their tenuous relationship with the rapacious boat-owner to be fruitless and exploitative. They verbally abuse the hopelessly one-sided power dichotomy and their fate. " *And you see it is all our labour, all our toil – we who have our lives—and deaths too –on water...*"(P 172)says Durgapada. They realize that the breaking of caste-barriers is the only way to turn a distant dream into reality or for them progress would remain a mere myth. Ratikanta says, "*We can never be united because of our obsession with caste and creed. I am a Poundrakshatriya, I call Pranab a Teli, Pranab calls Parimal -a Jele, Parimal calls Durgapada- a Namashudra, and Durgapada in turn calls Rahim uncle -a Muslim*" (P 173). The story has an open–ending with the determined men on the brink of making a momentous resolution as Durgapada says, "*We have only one caste- one religion – that of fisherman*" (P 173).

Makhanlal Pradan 's ***Gopal Chashar Jat Dharma (Farmer Gopal's Caste and Creed)*** translated by Gautam Buddha Sural , is a quaintly pitiful narration of a Dalit farmer's plight as he is forced to try his luck at different professions to eke out a living. He finds himself being intimidated into giving up his productive land and the traditional occupation of agriculture to suit the needs of the rapacious land mafia who wished to change the face of Kolkata. This involves driving out the hapless farmers and changing their lives for the worse. Gopal goes through the terrifying ordeal of an identity crisis as he is alienated by the 'Babu' he serves for a pittance and his other social superiors. Though reduced to the lowly profession of a bonded laborer with meager wages, he has imbibed a certain degree of false pride from the elite which inhibits him from working as a fish farm holder which he thinks, is a lowly profession. "*The only thing that is bothering him is the abhorrent thought of becoming a*

fisherman. He was a farmer, then he became a coolie, from a coolie to a mason: and now a fisherman? He won't become one" (P 98). The stigma attached to fish farming seemingly over rides his desire to provide for his family. Denied a proper identity of which he can be proud of, he lets his son waste away from starvation rather than lower himself further. His friend Manmatha exhorts him to go to work saying, "*Do the poor have any caste? Our work determines our caste.*"(P.98). The rhetorical questions sum up the situation precisely as it is ; indeed it is the truth that people like Gopal and his friends realize early in their lives. Understanding that for people like him, prosperity is an elusive dream he is on the verge of surrendering himself to his ignominious fate as it is either that or watching his child die in torment.

Anya Ihudi (The Other Jew) by Kapil Krishna Thakur translated by Anghuman Kar reveals the utter helplessness of a group of migrants who are pushed out of East Pakistan after the Partition and are treated like the scum of the earth in India despite their religious association with a majority Hindu community. They are at the mercy of vicious anti-social elements at both places and there is no real escape from the horrors of such a life. The story is a soul searing comment on the helplessness of a disadvantaged group at the tentative mercy of callous political parties and their goons. Often patronized by the conniving leaders, Bishtucharan, a former teacher in a village school in East Pakistan stays on even after the Partition. But tragic circumstances soon force him to flee. His beautiful daughter Jhunu is gang raped and dies as a result. Fearing the same fate for his younger daughter Rhunu, he comes to stay with Brajabasi, a former friend and relative. He casts aside his dignity and works as a vendor in the Railway to support his family. Then one day Rhunu, Chenno her cousin and several other girls of their colony are seized and gang raped by the goons of the local leaders. An anguished Bishtu bewails his pathetic fate and wonders at the misery of the low-born refugee who is treated the same everywhere. He cries, "*O Bejo, my Bejo for what then did you leave your home behind? Where is our real home?*"(P. 90).These migrants are doubly victimized by the major religions, the Muslims in East Pakistan and by the Hindus in India. No matter where, Bishtucharan and all the rest



of the people like him are stateless, helpless victims caught in a web of crafty politics and merciless exploitation.

The title story is ***Ekhono Adim (Survival)*** by Shyamal Kumar Pramanik and translated by Amrit Sen. It is a poignant account of the fierce struggle of two semi-human beings, who in order to survive and to ensure the survival of their son, engage in a frenzied search for food grains stashed in a snake pit. There is intense drama and the tension mounts as the main protagonist Raju Rajawan displays a rare courage as he fights a cobra in its lair to secure food grains from the pit. It is indeed a deadly game and Matia, his wife and his son Sonu, implore him to refrain from killing the snake God. Chased and badly beaten by farmers earlier, Raju refuses to leave without his prize this time. "No, I won't retreat! I will kill it today if that's the last thing I do!" (P.145) he says. The terrible ordeal ends as the snake is chased away and survival for the family is ensured because of Raju's indomitable courage. The story reveals the gripping intensity of Dalit consciousness and the tremendous effort to exist with the barest of amenities. Here there are no luxuries, only a desperate fight for food and survival.

Tarakanath Majhi's story ***Sakhya (Friendship)*** translated by Subhendu Sarkar is about a rather strange state of affairs. Set in the backdrop of several political conflicts in the Gangetic plains of West Bengal, a small fraction of people slowly dwindle into oblivion. The services of the local goon, Gayanath are no longer required as he is now in his dotage. He muses over his glorious past as a dangerous stick wielding goon-for-hire for the land lord and later for a political leader. He comes across his erstwhile Muslim adversary Majed Mian against whom he had long cherished a bitter rivalry. To his surprise he realizes that they are both in the same boat, reduced to hapless doddering old men dependent on the vague sympathies of passer-by and shrewish daughters-in-law. They both realize the futility of their youthful endeavors and rue the fact that they allowed themselves to be exploited by their social superiors. Dalitisation at its worst excludes them from the mainstream and induces a strange empathy between two former rivals. They are now merely confused, alienated old men beset by bodily

pains, misunderstood by the younger generation and marginalized by the society. Through no fault of theirs, they are also devoid of an identity. Their friendship is built on the firm grounds of shared sympathy notwithstanding the palpable difference in their religious affinities.

Understanding the angst of a populace suffering through the Ages has remained limited because even though the constitutionally egalitarian society spawned its own literature, the emotions remained fettered within the confines of the regional language. The survival of the Dalits is shrouded by scenes of bloody violence, yet they remain proudly defiant, resilient and courageous. They live on the edge of exploitation, negation and revolt, refusing to yield to the indignities heaped on them. The stories provide an interesting insight into the lives of people usually written off as commonplace and propagandistic. Shorn of a voice for so long, their voices are not enjoyable but clamor with the harsh realities of existence. They break free from the constructs imposed on them by the hegemonic order and find liberation in raising awareness about their triumphant survival through trying times. The anthology is thus a fitting tribute to the indomitable spirit of survival as exhibited by a hitherto suppressed ethnic group.

REFERENCE

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