

Othering the Dalits: in Selected Bengali Dalit Short Stories

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Abstract: *The present article focuses on the issues of sexual harassment, untouchability, and power relation, and access to the source of income, as addressed in three short stories of Jatin Bala, Pramodbaran Biswas, the Bengali Dalit litterateurs. What the present researcher found in the selected stories naturally raises the question of whether the practitioners of untouchability believe in the validity of untouchability or not. As the stories show, untouchability is a mere weapon used against the so-called 'untouchables' to deprive them of access to the renewable sources of income, and thereby othering them, and this is why they do not hesitate to touch the lower caste women while molesting them.*

Key terms: Ethnicity, Untouchability, Sexual harassment, Power relation, Other, Otherization, Othering, Otherness, We feelings, Hegemony.

Nowadays the phrase “Dalit literature”, is not merely the proper name of a literary genre but the deed of the struggle of thousands of Dalit people many of whom had to migrate from East Pakistan to India and fight against Death, and somehow won the battle and ultimately reached a successful life. The characters and events, as delineated in the Dalit short stories, seem to be speaking to the readers; the words they speak are taken from the mouth of the sons of the soil; the pictures presented in the stories bear the mark of the firsthand experience of the authors. Often as unbiased and silent observers, the litterateurs seem to have seen life closely and captured in their mind and later on used the experiences as their ingredients for the stories, and as a result, most of the stories have become very true to life.

This paper aims to find out the issues of ethnicity and to explore how the ethnic identity of a lower caste woman may make her the victim of sexual harassment in a caste-based hierarchical society, as seen in Jatin Bala's short stories “Bishakto Basona” (“Poisonous Desire”), ‘Jowal’ (‘Yoke’) and “Notun Jiban” (“New Life”), in his anthology *Samaj Bodoler Golpo (Tales of Social Change)*, Pramodbaran Biswas's short story, “Jiten Gharamir Katha” (“On the Life of Jiten Gharamir” from *Sotoborsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya*) The paper also attempts to find out the relation of power in case of molestation of the women of lower ethnic identity and the deprivation of the lower-caste people from the sources of income.

W.W. Isajiw argues that the concept of ethnicity may subsume questions of migration, common national or geographical origin, same culture or custom, religion, race, or physical characteristics. (Isajiw). However, sociologists as usual are divided in their opinion on the definition and features of ethnicity. According to Isajiw the objective definitions of ethnicity assume people's social attachments as the reason behind the existence of various ethnic groups (Isajiw), and so, ethnicity is concerned with people's differences in language, culture, customs, national origin, and ancestry, and these differences are more or less unchangeable. And the subjective approach to ethnicity deals with the process of identification *i.e.* identifying a group of people as a particular ethnic group and this process is a socially constructed one and so, may be relative. This process is undertaken by both the identifiers and the identified as belonging to the same ancestral or cultural community. As such, the members of the community so identified share a common “we feeling”. All of the chief characters in the Bengali Dalit stories are mostly the lower caste people and some are refugees from East Pakistan and so, the victims of the Partition of India; they have a culture of their own, they speak the language of their own, they

have their caste identity that is looked down upon by the elite people of India, and so, the issue of ethnicity best fits the characters in stories under my study.

As often race and ethnicity are treated as interchangeable the study should necessarily be preceded by a brief discussion on some fundamental differences between race and ethnicity which are important parts of the social reality. While ethnicity is more cultural than biological, race is just the contrary. According to Audrey Smedley, race refers to a group of people who share certain inherited physical features, such as colour of skin, facial features, and stature. So, the key question that may arise is whether race is more of a biological category or merely of a social category. Most people think of race in the biological sense, and for more than 300 years, or even from the time when the white Europeans' started colonizing the populations of colour elsewhere, the race has indeed been serving as the "premier source of human identity" (Smedley, 1998, p. 690).

Thus, the biologically stratified groups of people include "Caucasoid," "Mongoloid," and "Negroid" races all of whom are believed to have been descended from the Homo sapiens—the unchangeable identities. Racial identity and ethnic identity often overlap each other since two different members of the same racial community may have two different geographical or linguistic identities.

The "we feeling" often gives birth to a bitter conflict between two contending ethnic groups and naturally ethnicity and race have occupied significant places in Sociology, Anthropology and cultural studies, and of course in film studies since the film is the audio-visual representation of the societal reality. Closely related to the "we feeling", is the concept of 'other', as well as 'otherness', 'otherization' and 'othering' which, according to Michel Foucault, is closely related to power and knowledge. When the members of a group 'other' another group, they point out their perceived weaknesses to make themselves look stronger or better. And it naturally implies a hierarchy and serves to keep power at the place it already lies. Colonialism, Foucault thinks, is an example of the powers of othering. (<https://newnarratives.wordpress.com/issue-2-the-other/other-and-othering-2/>). But the migrated people in Bala's stories are seldom seen expressing their consolidated "we feelings" because of the multi-faceted system of oppression of the dominant minority group and their age-old hegemonic control over the majority whose consolidation had been prevented at any cost, as noticed in Bala's stories.

The process of 'othering' whether based on gender, language, skin colour, religion, or caste, always involves a power relation and it is practiced to relegate and/or exploit the targeted group(s). In India, the aboriginal people who nowadays are better known as 'Dalits' are 'othered' though they belong to the majority group, as reflected in the stories under the study. And the Dalit litterateurs including Jatin Bala and Pramodbaran Biswas have shown in their literary pieces how the minority groups 'other' and exploit the majority. Mieke Verloo in his article "Intersectional and Cross-Movement Politics and Policies: Reflections on Current Practices and Debates" argues there is a long list of the exploited and dehumanized groups of people who, over the last century, have somehow gained access to the fundamental human and democratic rights—right to education and bodily integrity, to vote, to get married, to own property, to have access to public services, and even to live as a family. (*Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory). Verloo cites the example of the feminist movements as the specific case at hand, and in the Indian context, the case of the Dalits has affinities with the feminists' movements and their achievements. In the same article Verloo, invoking Charles

Tilly's theory of durable inequality attempts to interpret how a powerful position may affect the chance of abolishing inequalities. He reinterprets Tilly's concept of four mechanisms for continuous reproduction of inequality: exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation. The exploitation mechanism, Tilly thinks, provides the people concerned with a certain amount of power and thereby enables them to create an added value through the efforts of the people outside the exploiter's category. Secondly, the mechanism of opportunity-hoarding enables the members of a group to acquire access to a renewable resource that could prove profitable in the long run, and so, the group tries to monopolize the access to it. It is hard to believe that some linguistic ethnic groups have such monopolies. Indeed, though monopoly never depends on the linguistic identity, the speakers of the so-called 'elite' languages monopolize the avenue to the world of 'elite' culture, aristocratic lifestyles, white-collar jobs, politically powerful positions and everything about comparatively higher standards of living. The speakers of the dialects remain underprivileged and are looked down upon because of their 'distorted' articulation and 'distorted' language practices, which the elite people do not accept as proper. In Bala's stories very often we find the use of 'Bangaal bhasha' by the migrated people who are looked upon by the elite people.

Jatin Bala's short stories capture this power relation as evident in the caste-based society of rural as well as urban Bengal. In his story titled 'Jowal' ('Yoke'), Bala aptly portrays the painful plight of a Dalit woman, Shova who deeply loves her sick, skeletal husband, Madan Das and bears the burden of her family, without uttering a word of complaint against him. After the death of Madan, Shova herself takes over the yoke of her family. Madan and Shova are no individuals, rather are the representatives of the Dalits who render manual labour from dawn to dusk but cannot afford the minimum facility of paid medical facilities, because the renewable means of production is manipulated by the minority castes. When her son is ill and the well-wishers argue that it is the influence of any witch, she does not get angry with the unknown witch; rather she is ready to rush to her and fall at her feet and beg her pardon because she knows that the dominant section of the society may accept a suppliant Dalit, but not a protesting one. Shova knows that she belongs to an untouchable community and also that the touchable-untouchable issue is religiously grounded, yet she is respectful to the religious system, and herein lies the question of hegemony.

It may be recalled here that Antonio Gramsci in his *Notes on the Southern Question* defined 'hegemony' as a system of the class alliance in which a "hegemonic class" exercised political leadership over "subaltern classes" by "winning them over." (Ramos) and Shova in the story concerned belongs to the subaltern class. The hegemonic class being politically privileged and having the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA), often wins over the voice of the masses, and we notice it in the story. Religion as ISA has taught Shova that she is untouchable but firmly believes that worshipping goddess, Kali may cure her son's disease.

For Gramsci, the state embodies "the hegemony of one social group over the whole of society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, trade unions, schools, etc.," (Cammet, 1967, 204) and in the context of Bala's story, the term 'Kalimandir' (temple of the goddess, Kali) may be substituted for 'church', as we see, Shova is inclined to give her offering at the temple. Gramsci added "another dimension to the definition of hegemony: domination by consent. It seems impossible that anyone would consent to be oppressed, or that we might be consenting to oppress others" (<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfox/gramsci.html>). But it happens in reality because the majority of

people belong to Sudra communities and they consent to their age-old oppression and seldom protest against the system, and if anyone attempts to do so s/he is 'othered', as in the case of Shova. Her question "Why my touch will impure mother Kali? I'm also a human being as you people," (trans. mine) has many affinities with the ethnic question of Shylock in Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Chandragupta in D.L. Roy (*Chandragupta*). Shylock and Mura raise their voices in favour of the marginal people and Roy felt their agony after he had been marginalized, and so did Jatin Bala. A comparison between the speeches of Shylock and Chandragupta may show their affinities:

Shylock: I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew's eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? A-III-s-i).

Chandragupta: Sudrani! Is not a Sudra a human being? Does she have no hands and legs, as a Kshatriya has? No mind? No heart? (Act-I, s-iv), (Trans. Mine).

Shova's question reminds any critical mind, of Shylock and Chandragupta. But while the Jews are collectively against their relegation, the Dalits are not, because the Hindu society is not only divided into four Varnas but thousands of subcastes having the system of graded inequality that prevents their unification, and this is why when Shova is beaten up the fellow Dalits do not come forward in protest. Because the religious system as ISA has taught the Dalits that any of them if ignores the religious taboos, deserves to be beaten up or even more serious punishment. Jatin Bala as an unbiased observer has portrayed this painful social reality in his story 'Jowal'.

In the story entitled "Jiten Gharamir Katha" by Pramodbaran Biswas from the recollection of the rickshaw-puller we come to know how the Brahmin zamindar looked down upon the lower-caste people, "Dhiren, you belong to Namasudra, a lower caste. How can we, people from a higher caste, offer you food. Your touch would defile our plates, glass, all". So, anybody may think that the upper-caste people were so conscious of 'untouchability'. But from another incident we come to that they did not believe in the religiosity of the system. One day Jiten's father rushed to meet the zamindar keeping Jiten in tow. When he went near the *zamindar*, he lay down in obeisance keeping a distance of at least five feet. The *zamindar* approached his father's prostrate body and placing his foot with a shoe upon his back said, "Wake up and split the logs now. The rituals of the *Durga Puja* will start tomorrow. Our relatives will come from afar, others will also come. Almost a hundred goats will be sacrificed during puja. We have to make the preparation beforehand." So, it is clear that the upper-caste people obeyed the system of untouchability to 'otherize' the Dalits and to deprive them of their due wages. But when to 'otherize' them it was necessary to touch them they unhesitatingly did it. Jiten's forceful rustication from the school testifies to the fact that the upper-caste people were vehemently against the upward class mobility of the lower ones so that they might perpetuate their hegemonic control and thereby monopolize their control over the white-collar profession. The pseudo philanthropy of the upper-caste people is also skillfully captured in the story—the zamindar founded the school seemingly for the masses but the lower-caste people rarely received the facility of education, as Jiten was forced to leave the school and work as the cowboy of the zamindar.

The phrase "Ideological State Apparatuses" was used as societal or state "mechanisms for creating pliant, obedient citizens who practice dominant values" by Luis Althusser whose theory has close affinities with Gramsci's. According to Althusser also the state apparatuses include social institutions like churches, schools, families, courts, political parties, unions, media and even sports. (Leitch 2001, 1477). The hegemonic control of the minority group over the

masses, with the mechanical as well as political state apparatuses, and the hegemony “by consent” are aptly dramatized in Jatin Bala’s short story, ‘Jowal’.

Jatin Bala who has firsthand experience of untouchability shows that untouchability has no religious ground even to the Brahmins; rather they wearing a pseudo-religious mask use the system as a tool for oppression and exploitation and eternalizing the power relation. According to Lyn Yonack

Despite its name, sexual abuse is more about power than it is about sex. Although the touch may be sexual, the words seductive or intimidating, and the violation physical, when someone rapes, assaults, or harasses, the motivation stems from the perpetrator’s need for dominance and control. In heterosexual and same-sex encounters, sex is the tool used to gain power over another person.

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/201711/sexual-assault-is-about-power>).

It is aptly captured in Bala’s story “Bishakto Basona” (“Poisonous Desire”). In the story under review Satish, the drum player is untouchable but inevitable in religious ceremonies. After his death, his wife gets the job of cleaning the courtyard adjacent to the temple but has no access to the temple. But when her young daughter is raped by the priest, Sadhan Chakraborty her untouchability does not matter. She is dragged into the temple and no deity, no human being, or even the temple is not polluted with her touch. Here Bala indirectly raises another question, “Does the priest himself believes in the deity’s conscious and almighty self? If he does, how can he sin in front of the idol? So, temples, idols, etc. are nothing but tools for centralizing the sources of wealth and power.

Again, in the story “Notun Jiban” (“New Life”) Moyna, the pregnant wife of Juron, the poor peasant is the victim of the sexual lust of their landlord. It may be mentioned here that the time the incident happens Moyna is at the advanced stage of her pregnancy and a feeble lady who has no physical charm that may invite the physical desire of a male, yet she is molested and herein lies the relation of power. Thus, Bala skillfully portrays the pseudo religiosity of the priest and baselessness of the system of untouchability, the lust for sex as a symbol of their social superiority, and thereby launches a robust protest against the system of power relation associated with religion. And it may be said that bringing the pseudo religiosity of the upper-caste people of the society to light, the Bengali Dalit literature has been a literature of counter-hegemony.

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