International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies
ISSN: 2709-4952(Print) and ISSN 2709-7390(Online)
Volume 3, Issue 2 Article 6
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47631/ijecls.v3i2.417

Contesting Imposed Existence: Re-thinking Precepts of Identity in Bengali Dalit Narratives

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Received: 09-01-2022 **Revised:** 28-03-2022 **Accepted:** 30-03-2022

Abstract

The concept of identity as a social construct is constantly in a state of flux when applied to a Dalit. In the context of post-Partition Bengal, the Namasudra community migrating from East Pakistan become slaves of constructs, such as 'caste', 'refugee', and 'communalism'. The complexity of these imposed identities becomes their common means of visibility that deprives them of both sides of the border subjecting them to recurrent displacement. In such situations, the Dalit expressions of anguish and emotion in their narratives become a significant source and claim towards an individual and collective truth. This article presents an analysis of how Dalit writers from the very confines of caste/communal bondage and slavery reciprocate an emotional identity to produce a different worldview. This will involve interpreting the extent to which expressing emotion carries the value of liberation, harmony and become a silent rebellion breaking from the dominant history associated with refugees. The article addresses this by specifically focusing on two short stories of the Namasudra writer Jatin Bala – 'Akaipur in Flames' and 'The Two Ends of a Broken Bridge'.

Keywords

Caste, Partition, Border, Communal, Dalit, Emotion, Identity

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Being a Dalit means being conscious of a broken and diasporic life, just as being Dalit in a divided Bengal is almost synonymous with a victim's notion of uncertainty regarding the socio-religious existence. By adhering to the idea of representing the suffering of a community that has become the persisting phenomenon of any Dalit writer, the concept of identity as a social construct is seamlessly in a state of flux. Historical moments became determinist factors grounding a state of reality that conditioned a pattern of living. The lives of Bengal Dalits were greatly influenced by the realities wrought by Partition. In the introductory essay to the anthology *Under My Dark Skin*, Debi Chatterjee enunciated the politics of migration faced by the Namasudra community in post-Partition Bengal. While many preferred to remain in their ancestral homeland which became East Pakistan, the flaring communal tensions forced an exodus after a traumatic loss of culture and livelihood (Chatterjee xix-xx). The refugee identity imposed on the uprooted community became the central means of visibility adhering to which they were granted scope of rehabilitation. However, the state's exiguous relief measures and severe policies of dispersal happen to further dislocate them ('Dispersal and the Failure' 1002).

On the other hand, caste-based identity continues to be enunciated in new and more complex forms but still strictly keeping to the old principles of alienation. The breakdown of the structure of displacement among refugees belonging to the different strata of society shows the limits to democracy which strategically refuses to accommodate a certain section of these uprooted albeit subtly. K.M. Panikkar had clarified how caste and democracy are binaries founded on strongly irreconcilable ideologies:

> Democracy and caste are totally opposed … one is actuated by the principle of social inclusion, the other by the principle of social exclusion. Democracy tries to break down the barriers of class; caste seeks to perpetuate them … (qtd. in Pandian 36)

This inverted relation is a prevalent factor for the socio-religious identity of the oppressed, and, therefore, it is no surprise that such a backdrop accentuated by Partition reconfigures in different forms in the narratives of Namasudra authors. This community, numerically the majority in eastern districts, closely perceived this politics of identity that shattered their solidarity, evicting them either on casteist or communalist grounds. The statement of Kanshi Ram clarifies the extent partition affected the Namasudras as both the

governments of Bangladesh and West Bengal expressed constant hostility intended to uproot them (Mallick 109).

Sipra Mukherjee asserted that caste was never an anachronism despite its association with tradition marking the assumption that such an "antiquated mode of society will have no place in a modern society built on secular, liberal values" (140). In a similar vein, Sarbani Bandyopadhyay heightened the need to rethink the discontinuity of caste's existence in Bengal stating that claims of its absence were a "nationalist/bhadralok myth" (71). Despite the territorial division and the seeming predominance of class (Sinharay 26) in the dominant political language, the existence of caste makes the very concept of 'identity', a twisted and of tenuous nature when applied to the refugees. In such a situation, the Dalit expression against the dictates of a nation-state and its biased machinery becomes the predominant source of narrative and claim to truth. My purpose in writing this paper is not to analyze how or wherein the flux of a socio-religious identity appeared or how it was carried forward by migrants following the decades of rehabilitation. It is to ascertain how Dalit authors from being slaves to refugees and caste/communal identity construct an emotional identity that acknowledges and protests against pre-existing modes of hierarchy. It is an alternate worldview not superimposed but born out of memoirs that provide them access to some elements of dignity. This article addresses this by referring to two translated short stories by the prominent Namasudra writer Jatin Bala.

Methodology

My study is based on a close reading of the translated version of the stories particularly emphasizing certain extracts asserting the ambiguity of communal and caste identity and the way these affect social relations. The interpretation also involves extra-textual knowledge as well as what other researchers articulated regarding these aspects. Through textual analysis, I correlate other opinions on the ideas of caste and communalism with those expressed in these works. Some arguments on the broader issue of being a minority as well as a refugee are presented. For this, the existing secondary sources are scrutinized to comprehensively provide historical instances influencing these issues and serve to be an important context behind analyzing the stories. These sources offer insights into the ideals of community and familial bonds that exist between members of different faiths. As a framework to analyze identity, Baburao Bagul's concept of 'democratic socialism' is incorporated only as opposed to a fatalistic ideology that is a way of complying with the demands of class society. Adherence to this concept denotes an awareness of revolution and freedom struggle by rejecting caste and the economic and social system based on it (Bagul 289-290). This is employed to understand the imposed lived reality of Dalit characters portrayed in the stories and interpret their manner of refutation.

The main drawback of this analysis is that since it is undertaken using translated texts, some cultural connotations of the original are overlooked. While some Bengali dialect words and cultural terminologies are retained here, they do not suffice to fully carry the essence of the author's actual opinion or the exact feelings of plight as documented. Nonetheless, these hindrances would not considerably affect my analysis of the narrative style and arguments as my purpose is to draw from the texts the factors related to memories that connect the past with contemporary existence using emotionally charged events that generate variant perspectives.

The Stature of Caste Identity

Manohar Biswas conceded that Dalit literature was a product of the ongoing caste-class dichotomy. It is a rudimentary thrush borne out of the cultural hegemony for which such texts "inculcate a new mood and conviction in the domain of literature" keeping "caste identity a center-table in the drawing-room" (Biswas 105-107). The obliteration of consciousness of the very identity of being marginal has been a significant factor elaborated upon earlier by Sharankumar Limbale. He stated that "Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery" (Limbale 32) for which a revolutionary mentality becomes a social responsibility. Denying the propagandist nature of this literature he asserted "expressing emotion is integral to the literature they produce" (35) carrying the primary motif of liberation. The ostracization caused by a caste identity provoked resentment which is in a form of venting rage, anguish which becomes a natural disposition. This resentment becomes the basis for the consciousness of self-identity that attempts to break the parameters of discrimination. This is a collective truth shared by most Dalit writers and it is hardly different in the context of Bengal. Jatin Bala's story 'Akaipur in Flames' locates untouchability behind the commotion with which the narrative begins. The setting of the village is significant with a Durga temple in the middle having a small playground often visited by Dalit children from the surrounding dwellings.

A coldness between the local Brahmins and Dalits prevailed that flared up when Sunita, the six-month-old daughter of Basona soiled the temple ground with her faeces. The wrath of the Brahmin Rampada Mishra was vented out in derogatory terms of untouchability and demand for ritual bloodshed ('Akaipur in Flames' 88, 89). The outcry led to a gathering and soon Rampada found himself sneering not only at Basona but the entire Namasudra community of Akaipur who withstood his spite with counter abuses essentially denoting the awareness of their recurrent struggle for liberation against the very jargon of enslavement:

> Those days are gone when one could swing us with a loop on our noses […] Try abusing us again and I will smash your mouth. I'll pull out your tongue. (90)

The pouring of this wrath pushed back Rampada rendering him speechless at what he perceived to be the gathering boldness of Namasudras. However, this was not the actual 'flame' referred to in the title. The story does not end here. The narrative proceeded to reveal the height of caste aggression when the Brahmin retaliated with his three sons Dinesh, Sudhir, and Dhiresh who were much feared in the area. They caught Basona off-guard in broad daylight while she was cooking and poured the boiling *dal* over her and her daughter scorching them both. (91-92)

The deprived life of a Dalit creates a 'slavish mentality' (Dangle xxv) that either seeks to face and accept the harsh reality as it is or attempts to sanskritize themselves by adapting the behavioral codes of the upper castes. In both cases, Dalits fall victim to the dominant cultural values that mostly sought to reciprocate using the discourse of caste. In the introduction to *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender*, Sharmila Rege stated:

> The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde past but an oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society requires therefore that we integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender. (5)

The statement holds true except that this story did not particularly emphasize on the question of gender but sought to use the tradition of caste to connect the past with the contemporary society that continues to witness its cruelty. In this episode with Basona and her daughter, the violence inflicted was because she displayed outspokenness in an attempt to break from the periphery of the slavish mentality. This did not mark her attempt to enter a restricted power relation as much as to empower herself democratically against deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. It once again highlights what Dwaipayan Sen considers to be the "peculiarity of West Bengal's caste question" (124) that refutes any possibility of a lower caste autonomy. He considered the silence on this question a result of 'deliberated discrimination' countering an implication by Partha Chatterjee that such discrimination was an unintended consequence of the state's otherwise honorable intentions. This story stands apart by negating the fragility of their autonomy. Following the shocking display of brutality, there is another gathering of the folks described thus:

> Dark shadows of anxiety loomed large on their faces. They stood in a semicircle around her and her daughter … took a glance at Basona's wound on her back and the blisters on Sunita's face … started wailing, stamping the ground … (93)

The 'wound on her back' and 'blisters' become symbolic not only of growing agitation but of a change noticeable within the crowd influenced by the memory of this incident as well as every instance of similar violence silently witnessed throughout history. The consciousness of shared turmoil due to their low status was hindered no longer. It made them expectant of a miracle, a social revolution, not enunciated but hinted at by the author:

> They waited impatiently for something tremendous to happen just like the speeding turbulent tide waters of a broken dam holding the accumulated grievances of the past hundreds of centuries. (96)

This expectation of outflow connected them with a strong emotion which is an amalgamation of sympathy, ferocity, and agony that culminated in the titular 'flames'. Its echo was so strong that Basona amidst all her pain felt the impact of this emotion which brought tears and strengthened her mind. This emotional identity generated not only has the capacity to question power relations but destabilize the existing ideas of caste's dehumanizing aspects and reform social structures. Though created from the situational predicament, it is a retelling of solidarity. It is one aspect of the community consciousness of the Namasudras which as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay said began in the late nineteenth century with a demand for the betterment of self-respect and self-image ('Community Formation' 2563). Though the story ends abruptly with the crowd's restless mobility toward the Brahmin's house, it succeeds in justifying that the strength of emotional attachment prevents Dalit unity from being completely deteriorated by any agenda of oppression.

The Stature of Refugee-Communal Identity

The solidarity accentuated by emotion even holds true when placed before the event of Partition. Bala's story 'The Two Ends of a Broken Bridge' (henceforth 'The Two Ends') placed in the context of physical uprootedness reciprocates a refugee and communal aspect providing it with insightful cross-border bondage. While instances of

violence between Muslims and Namasudras happened in the past these were petty disputes associated with rights over plots of land. The strength of community consciousness was highlighted in these disputes but took a different turn in the early twentieth century. Bandyopadhyay asserted that the political behavior of lower caste peasantry in border districts marked a shift in political allegiance, forming a greater identification with the Hindu community. This all-encompassing unity as a territorial argument became the genesis of Partition (*Caste, Culture and Hegemony* 193-201). It aggravated a sense of pride leading to resentment toward the Muslims to whom the community labored as slaves in several districts (2565). This resentment was intensified with the caste consolidation programs of the 1930s aimed to create an expanded Hindu political community in Bengal (*Bengal Divided* 196). The unification of castes was a significant instrument at the hands of the 'bhadralok' to strengthen their political authority by bringing low castes and indigenous tribes within the broader Hindu fold. This strategy was convenient at a time when several lower castes were themselves attempting to 'purify' their social practices. These had serious repercussions on the relations between Namasudras and Muslims visibly in the late 1940s. The reports gathered by Joya Chatterji served as evidence for this argument. Instances referring to communal tensions include:

> The Dacca disturbances in 1941 were marked by 'violent clashes' in Khulna between Namasudras and Muslims in which 'the number of casualties [were] believed to be considerable … Noakhali experienced one of the worst carnages in Bengal's bloody history of communal conflict, many of the victims were Namasudras … (202-203)

The study on such tensions was divided but opinions were mostly centered on the dominant history of clashes. The common discourse on the Namasudras following Partition attuned to their status as 'riot refugees' (Rahman and Schendel 562) with which the displaced borderland communities were identified. The individual perspectives on how such communities resist their physical distancing by the barbed wire borders and maintain connections have not been clearly defined (Lorea 235).

Traversing against the dominant current Jatin Bala juxtaposes the communal-border discourse by bridging two families of both faiths. In 'The Two Ends', the connection is distinctly emotional but with a lateral thought process working on multiple planes. The extrovert narrator Ratan, implicitly carrying the burden of a riot refugee, relentlessly tries to dig up the past in the ceaseless effort to identify with other people bearing similar memories and language of forced migration. In this context, when he meets with a fellow passenger Akash and his family on a train at Bongaon station, this conscious self-reflexive pursuit finds a strong source to churn up a late communal ethnicity with the post-Partition state of existence.

During the conversation between Ratan and Akash, it was Fatima *amma*, the latter's grandmother who instantaneously brought flashbacks of bleak memories of Ratan hidden "deep inside like unhealed carbuncles" ('The Two Ends' 72). Tracing the importance of reviving a stigmatized discourse, Rajat Roy ascertained that Namasudras construct their own version of the past which attempt to represent a golden age, a sense of belonging in a 'utopia' of their community (79). Recollecting lost mobility through memoirs and using texts to obliterate the very idea of the border by reinventing identity demonstrates the craving of Dalit authors for an alternate social imagination that contrast the experience as refugees. The conversation between Fatima *amma* and Ratan through the flashback

technique idealizes not only their shared communal anxiety in the past but a shared pacification of it at present. The entire story serves to communicate steadfastly the reason why the narrator's "heart does not agree with what my mind understands as Partition" (73). The foremost manner of communicating this was the very act of pouring uncontrollable spasms of emotion at the sudden meeting of a long-lost brethren:

> I exclaimed, 'You are Mohidul's son!' I am amazed. The old world comes to life. Excited he trembles and has goosebumps. Restlessly I say, 'Fa-ti-ma *am-ma*, Fatima *am-ma*, I am *khokon*, Abinash Biswas's son. Ratan. I am Ratan, *amma*'. (74)

This exclamation was reciprocated by an equally vivid rush of emotions. The narrator describes the aged Fatima *amma*'s reaction thus:

> She sighs heavily. Her lips tremble as she cries out, '*Allah*, can such things happen on this earth! *Khokon* is that you *baba*?' … It looks as though, breaking its cage, her heart is trying to force its way out. (74-75)

From a communal angle, the word *Allah* demarcates the identity of Fatima *amma* but which dissipates here before the more endearing vernacular expressions of kinship in *khokon* and *baba*. Instead of creating any grounds of diffidence, the word set in this context before a strong pervading emotional identity ironically neutralizes any slavish mentality or communal agenda. As the story progresses, its impact is felt even more when Ratan recedes fifty years down the memory lane when he unconsciously inhaled the odor of this ideology. Set in the neighboring village of Machna and Madhupur, where the two families were located, he describes the area as:

> A huge tamarind tree stood in between – marking the borders. When we youngsters played beneath the huge tree the religious divide used to vanish. (78)

Structurally, the concept of 'border' takes a new meaning here, instead of severing the knots of harmony, it strengthens it by acting as a landmark in the narrator's memory. When this natural border of 'tamarind' tree was replaced by the political border, the slowly emerging community consciousness started to manifest itself as elements of mistrust and doubt emerged in both communities. Ratan became a blind victim of skepticism when on one occasion he visited his friend Mohidul's house but refused to taste the *kachipora pitha* that was being prepared by Fatima *amma*. Though naïve to the concepts of 'riot', 'freedom' and 'partition' that were gradually becoming watchwords, Ratan became a part of this spreading consciousness of faith stating harshly that his refusal was on the ground that Mohidul and Fatima *amma* were Muslims. The reaction that followed, as a result, was not one of hatred but of angst:

> '*Baba*, you don't want to even taste *kachipora pitha* made by me because I'm a Muslim. You don't know but one day you survived after drinking my milk … and today you did not hesitate to point out that Mohidul is a Muslim.' (80)

Ratan's refusal was not due to any partiality toward the Muslims but a result of being inadvertently taken in by the dominant ideology. The pitiful words of *amma* made

him conscious of this truth and bitter realization of values of ethnicity that were gradually eroding. The *kachipora pitha* became symbolic of breaking historic shackles and preventing the family relations from being deluded by emotionally connecting them where religion failed. Ratan's self-regret made him mute and ashamed but this attachment remained. When the riots emerged, the same Muslim family helped them to cross the border as refugees. Amidst the incessant fire and bloodshed, the hidden attachment survived and acquired a new connotation at the sudden reunion after all these years.

The truth of this harmony was never guided by self-interest but by a genuine sense of belonging and solidarity. When Fatima *amma* fell severely ill and needed a blood transfusion it was only Ratan, who survived after her back then, having the ability to provide blood carried her out of danger. The layers of attachment thus go much beyond any personal faith that has not been prioritized in the story. This lack of difference is what the narrator hints at the end when referring to both Fatima *amma* and his motherland Bangladesh, he reflects on the ultimate truth in a direct address to the reader – "My two mothers have fused and merged into one. And I am to gaze at them forever from a distance" (87).

Conclusion

Dalit texts provide multiple points of convergence between history and literature as well as between the religious and social. 'Akaipur in Flames' and 'The Two Ends' present vehement protest against the notion of imposed identity by centralizing ties of humanity that run through both physical and psychological layers. Though these stories incorporate the institutions of 'caste', 'refugee', and 'communalism', they are least affected by them. The Dalit protest as interpreted is depicted here via certain contemplative states of being. In the textual flow of imparting ecstasies of emotions, the author did not attempt to historicize his narratives. Though the characters portrayed are influenced by past discourses which continue to generate a marginal status for Dalits, their implicit struggle against it has provided them with a sense of visibility. The subjectivity of Basona and Ratan did not wholeheartedly conform to the respective social structures that compelled them to follow a predetermined pattern of living. They are defined by an ardent democratic flow of thought that essentially acknowledges the self and empower the secular values of kinship and community. While their social lives are governed by a continuous tradition of oppression, their selves are characterized by a sense of awareness helping them to deny and stand apart from it. The stories provide glimpses of democratic socialism through solidarity as a driving factor behind maintaining a sense of identity. They do not embark upon a separate agenda for reforming history but express, in a contrived way, their aversion to the prevailing status quo. Additionally, there is a need to reform and re-shape Dalit consciousness at the individual level to properly grasp a sense of repressive order. This is one of the primary needs as expressed by Jatin Bala and this is still relevant in the context of Bengal where caste's prevalence and the aftereffects of partition are felt even at present times. Therefore, the element of emotion, as part of a separate identity, should not be undervalued as the foundation of a forceful socio-cultural Dalit movement rests upon a person's strong connection with a larger group. The control of such an identity rests not on any institutional authority but on individual choices. This itself necessitates a suitable way to comprehend oneself, the knowledge of hegemony, and discovering the spirit of equality among one's community or family. Amidst memories of all pain and anguish, both these characters accomplished this feat by ascertaining emotional identity as a distinctive part of Dalit ideology.

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