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Research Article




The Journey of the Dalit Refugees in Bengal: A Comparative Study of Allen Ginsberg and Jatin Bala's Poetry

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Abstract

Dalit literature seeks to present the struggles and experiences of the oppressed. Bengali Dalit literature has become a powerful tool for social and political action. It provides counter-narratives that talk about their experiences and realities. Bangla Dalit literature depicts the lives of refugees with sensitivity and empathy, emphasizing the struggles and resilience of those displaced from their homes and communities due to political, social and economic

factors. The term “refugee” refers to a person who has been forced to flee their country of origin. A large part of the population had to leave their homes and migrate from East Bengal to West Bengal as part of the Partition of Bengal, mainly due to the communal tension. However, most of the refugees who migrated to West Bengal during the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971 were mainly Dalits or other marginalized communities who faced discrimination and oppression in their homeland. Jatin Bala, one of the eminent Dalit writers and one of the refugees, himself reflected the pain and suffering of these Bengali Dalit refugees, on the other hand, Allen Ginsberg, the famous American writer Ginsburg, who visited Bangladesh amid the conflict, he also paints a sad picture of the loss of these Bengali refugees in his long poem “September On Jossor Road”. This study aims to carry out a comparative study of the representations of the two authors about these refugees.

Keywords: Refugee, Partition, Migration, Dalit, Displacement, Trauma, Marginalised community, Homeland, Mistreatment

Introduction:

Millions of fathers in rain
Millions of mothers in pain
Millions of brothers in woe
Millions of sisters nowhere to go. – **Allen Ginsberg**

The Dalit movement in Bengal, also known as the Namashudra Movement or Matua Andalon, used to be the most powerful Dalit movement in the entire nation, not just in Bengal. The movement's founder was Harichand Biswas, who in the late 19th century not only brought together Bengal's socially oppressed, politically outcaste, and religiously outcast untouchables, but also established a new religion called Matua Dharma. His son Guruchand Thakur greatly expanded and advanced the movement. Then, the movement reached its zenith and became highly stimulated and politically, “organize, educated and agitated” under the leadership of Jogendranath Mondal. The SCF party, led by the Dalit Messiah Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, essentially lost the election in his own state Maharashtra. Ambedkar was reelected in the constituent assembly 1946 from Bengal during this crucial time with the aid of the Namashudra Campaign. The so-called Chataloks of Bengal's dramatic and difficult win over the state's higher caste Bhadrloks demonstrated the strength of the Namashudra movement. Nonetheless, the community was shattered like a thunderbolt by the regrettable partition of Bengal in 1947, along with the riots, the cruelty of Pakistani soldiers towards the minorities, and the warlike conditions during the Bangladeshi Liberation movement forced majority of them leave their homeland. However, one part still remained in East Pakistan now in Bangladesh, one part in

West Bengal and rest were sent into different barren parts of the country in the name of rehabilitation, far away from their cultural, linguistic and regional identity.

As a result, during the post-partition era, the community endured numerous atrocities including displacement, mistreatment, and a murderous massacre known as the Marichjhapi massacre that took place in 1979 when a large number of Dalit refugees from Dandhyakaranya returned and self-rehabilitated on the island of Marichjhapi in the Sundarban delta without the assistance of the government. But the then Jyoti Bosu Bengal government led such massacre in the pretense of illegal settlement which is referred as 'the darkest episode' in the history of Bengal.

However, there are many issues raised by the paucity of literary works that address these upsetting tales of Bengal's Dalits. In this context, it must be made clear that most of the partition literature in India focuses on the division of the West Punjab and the East Punjab, while narratives of a more recent division—the division of the West Bengal and the East Bengal—along with the hardships and sufferings endured by Bengali refugees in general and Bengali Dalit refugees in particular—are almost completely ignored. Even such narratives hardly reflected in the main stream Bengali literature. When such heart rendering narratives could not get the attention of the contemporary Indian writers including so called progressive and intellectual Bengali writers, it could attract the kind and sympathetic attention of Allen Ginsberg, a famous author of America. Ginsberg (1926-1997) was an American poet and writer, who was the supporter of what is called literary movement 'art for life sake'. He was also a vocal political activist and an important role in the 1960s and 1970s anti-war and civil rights campaigns. Ginsberg was one of the sharpest critics opposing the war and notably the nuclear weapons doctrine of his own country. He criticizes his own nation in the following ways in his poem "America":

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb. (wiki)

However, during the process of the displacement of the millions of refugees, Ginsberg traveled to Bangladesh to aid refugees during Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. He was present in Bengal and was much numbed and shaken to the core by the pain of these refugees. He wrote a long poem *September on Jossore Road*, published in 1971. In this epoch-making poem, Allen Ginsberg describes the pictures of the sights, sounds and smells of the region as well as the turmoil of war and the suffering of the Bengali refugees. He found the refugees were homeless, foodless and hopeless in almost utter terrible circumstances. In the first few lines, Ginsberg summed up such pathetic conditions in the following way:

Millions of fathers in rain

Millions of mothers in pain

Millions of brothers in woe

Millions of sisters nowhere to go (*September on Jessore Road*)

Like a painter, he has painted their sufferings in words. He has described how the homeless shelter less millions of such refugees spending their hard time watching the sky and counting the starts and solacing their hunger with their big round eyes. As he says-

Millions of babies watching the skies

Bellies swollen with big round eyes. (*September on Jessore Road*)

Ginsberg also has described the wounds, pain, and madness of the refuses that lost their relatives in the recent communal riots and died on the way. In his own words-

One Million aunts are dying for bread

One Million uncles lamenting the dead

Grandfather millions homeless and sad

Grandmother millions silently mad (*September on Jessore Road*)

Thus, Allen Ginsberg artistically pained down the inhuman sufferings and pain of the refugees in the context of Bengal. However, through his poem, one can locate a kind of sympathetic and humanistic approach through the lens the Marxist point of view. Nevertheless, his poem has its own limits. He, perhaps, missed the sufferings and discriminations and atrocities Dalit refugees faced after crossing the newly made border.

In contrast, Jatin Bala is a Dalit author in Bengali literature. He was born in a Dalit family and his works were heavily influenced by his experiences as a Dalit. He wrote several short stories, essays and novels that highlighted the struggles and discrimination faced by Dalits in society. Some of his notable works include “*Swadhinata Theke Samajtantra*” (From Independence to Socialism), *Sarkarer Kaj*” (The Work of the Government), and *Samaj O Sangskriti*” (Society and Culture).

Bala is also a prominent activist and leader of the Dalit movement in West Bengal. He fought against caste-based discrimination and advocated for the rights of Dalits in Society. He was born Parhiyali, Manirampur in Jessore in the then East Pakistan on 5 May 1949. One of his stories, “On firm ground”, is included in translation in *Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation*. In the true sense, Jatin Bala can be compared with Rushdie’s *midnight’s children*, more specifically the *midnight’s unwanted or untouchable children*. He, at the age of six, crossed the borders and overnight found himself a refugee an untouchable refugee ironically in his own state, in his own country. As a refugee, he had to travel one refugee camps to another to search his relatives as well as some food. There was a time; he was forced to work as child labor in the paddy field owned by an arrogant Brahmin.

Once while carrying the heavy load of ripe paddy, he fell down as a result he was abused and brutally kicked by the Brahmin owner. Then, he grows up with countless similar bitter experiences stored in his mind. His poetic collection *The Verse as a sharpened weapon* along with his autobiography *Shekhorchera Jibon* (The Rootless Life) are like the mouth of the active volcanoes' that erupts the boiling, hot melted lava mixed with long suppressed anger, anguish and sufferings due to his caste class caste and refugee identity.

Bengal is thought to be a place where caste-based prejudice does not exist. The Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, a modern Bengali Dalit movement, however, has indented to show that such a claim is nothing more than a made-up myth in recent Bengali Dalit literature outpourings. In his article is there any Dalit Writings in Bengal? Mukherjee has pointed out in her introduction to *"Is there Dalit writing in Bengal?"*

If one accepts the truth of this claim it will be necessary to probe the historical circumstances that result in this relative indifference to cast identity among Bengalis or one could challenge the statement as a comportsing platitude perpetrated by the upper castes who dominate the literary world of Bengal. (4116)

When it comes to Bengal, caste prejudice was highly pervasive up to the turn of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore penned a piece in 1911 about the plight of the namahshudras. The namahshudras, according to him, are unfit to offer even the barest amount of collaboration required for surviving in a human society. According to Tagore, this discrimination was caused by a religious edict.

Many Dalit critics contend that throughout the rehabilitation of the so-called refugees, the caste identification of the refugees was crucial. The caste identities listed on the migration documents were used to split the migrants at the border. They were transferred to the refugee camps first, and from there they were forcibly transported to other desolate regions of the nation including Dandakaranya and Andaman. One of the well-known Bengali Dalit authors, Mouli Manahar Biswas, mentions the following in his book *Surviving in my Own World*:

Yes, in the refugee camp the segregation of the people that were priests caste identity was a surprising one. People with the good caste pearls in their pockets received preference in a settlement in market areas, business centers, developed areas and posh localities; whereas those having bad caste pearls in their pockets were given settlements in hilly areas, barren lands, unproductive areas, marshes. And most of these people had been given an allotment outside of Bengal. (Biswas 91)

In his article, *Is there any Dalit Literature in Bengal?*, makes a similar accusation. According to Monaranjan Byapari:

When the upper caste people uprooted from East Bengal set up some 149 unauthorized new colonies in and around *Kolkata*- in *Jadavpur*, *Dumdum*, *Sodepur*, etc, the state did not take any action against them. But when the *Namashudras* attempted to occupy an uninhabited island in the *Sundarbans* area called *Marichjhapi*, unspeakable atrocities were committed by the state machinery to evict them from there (Byapari 4119)

However, Jatin Bala goes into considerable depth about the terrible miseries of the Bengali Dalit refugees in his lyrical book *The Verse as Sharpened Weapon*. The poet laments the current circumstances of the Dalit refugees in his poem *A Deep Longest Poisonous Wound*. He recalls the turmoil that the neighborhood experienced during the division of East Bengal. Women were raped, their homes were set on fire, and individuals were slain. As a result, his heart was left with a kind of long, deep poisoned wound brought on by such horrible experiences. He described his wound in the manner described below:

Riots and partition
 Burnt houses and bloodsheds
 Death and rape are continuing
 A deep longest poisonous wound. (22-33)

The poet is also looking for clarification on a few issues. Whom has the nation been divided by? Who designated them as the partition's victims? Why is the border composed of iron? Why do Dalits end up on the streets? He queries:

Why had I been banished in an unknown land?
 For whom had this sub-continent been divided?
 Why has the fencing, iron-bar been lying at? (35-38)

In the poem *The Captive Life*, Bala wants to say that Bengali speaking Dalits are living the captive life. Bala regretfully says:

We are rotating only
 The hidden darkened ways. (8-10).

In the poem, *The Way*, Bala has compared the caste system with a round circle in which lower caste people have been rotating for centuries. There is no way out of this circle.

All the ways seem as a circle
 We're circling and circling
 For century after century (12- 14)

Bala contrasts his identity as a refugee with water hyacinth in the poem *The Life but Smeared with a Stagnant Myth*. A little plant known as a hyacinth, which always floats on the surface of the water and can be moved by water currents, is typically found in stagnant water like ponds.

It has no roots in the soil. The poet and his community are flitting from one area to another without permanence, much like hyacinth plants. Like parasites, they are. His words are:

I'm floating and floating/
During the whole life,
I've been floating
This is a life of a refugee
Like a floating hyacinth. (20-22)

Bala, again tries to compare his refugee life and caste system with a blind python that has been smashing their lives for a century.

Conclusion

It is evident from the discussion above that both writers attempted to capture the sorrow and agony of the Bengali refugees. The terrible pains and crimes endured by Bengali refugees in general and Bengali Dalit refugees in particular enhance both delicate poetic narratives. However the two stories are very different from one another. The tale by Ginsberg discusses the common misery of the migrants. Perhaps he was unaware that Dalits made up the majority of the refugees. The Dalit refugees are highlighted in Jatin Bala's verse. Jatin Bala's poetry chronicled all forms of unsung tales of atrocities and trauma from the beginning to the end, whereas Ginsberg's poetry only covered the sufferings faced during the displacement and he missed the aftermath suffering in the form of caste-based discrimination in border and misplacement and the deadly Marichjhapi massacre. Ginsberg lacks Dalit Chetna, hence his narratives are from a Marxist point of view. On the other side, Jatin Bala's verse identifies the smallest aspects as being the soul victims from the Dalit point of view. As their mothers are out in the rain and their brothers are in desperate situations with nowhere to turn, a substantial number of those refugees who were uprooted and misplaced are still in agony. Jatin Bala's contributions to Bengali literature and the Dalit movement in West Bengal continue to be recognized and celebrated today.

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