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“Midnight’s Untouchable Children” and their Struggle for Existence: A Study of Bangla Dalit Poetry of Manohar Mouli Biswas in English Translation

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Abstract

The Dalit Movement in Post-Independent India in general and West Bengal in particular has continued to advance anger and frustration. In Bengal, for example, the category of Dalit literature has not earned that much interest compared to the other parts of the country. Even in the Canon of Dalit literature of India at large, the literary contribution of the Bengali Dalit writers is also below average. It is worth mentioning that the partition of India in 1947, especially the division of Bengal, did not only destruct the spirit of their earlier strong Dalit movement of Bengal known as *Namashudra* Movement but scattered the whole united community into various places. Moreover, the partition of Bengal made the children of the Bengali untouchable community homeless, landless and foodless refugees. Therefore, for decades after the partition, they could not even think about restoring the activities of their Movement. For them and under such ruthless circumstances, the primary concern was the struggle for survival and existence rather than the engagement in the creative activities such as writing which was seen then as an unreachable matter or at least out of their interest. Manohar Maoli Biswas, one of the “Midnight’s untouchable children”, has attempted to describe the jerky journey of the Bengali Dalit refugees and their struggle for existence in his two collections of poetry.

Keywords: Movement, Identity, Partition Disperses, Refugee, Existence, Subaltern.

Introduction:

"If I speak untruth, I can survive,
If I speak the truth, it will be Explosive" Bulleh Shah

The Dalit Movement in post-Independent India in general and West Bengal in particular has continued to advance anger and frustration. In this state, the sincere efforts of the Dalit

(6)

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movement are devoted for the redefinition of their identity as a potential mass movement, encompassing all the oppressed masses, while challenging the different established traditional ideological discourses. There has been an unprecedented politicization of these marginalized masses during the last few decades making a remarkable impact on the socio-political structure of the state. In the context of West Bengal, the category of Dalit literature has not earned that much interest compared to the other parts of the country. Moreover, there is a prevalent perception among the so called upper caste Marxist "*Bhodhroloks*" of Bengal proposing that "caste discrimination is absent in Bengal resulted from the absence of Dalit writings." In contrast, the Dalits of Bengal, who are derogatorily called "*Chotoloks*", the opposite term of *Bhodhroloks*, want to introduce themselves as the victims of the caste discrimination. However, to reach out the conclusion for such ongoing conflict between *Bhodroloks* and *Chotoloks*, 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)

As far as West Bengal is concerned, the caste discrimination was very much prominent till the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1911, Rabindranath Tagore wrote about the condition of the *namahshudras* people (Dalits of Bengal were known by this name). He says:

I saw in the villages that no other caste would plough the land by the *namahshudras*; no one would harvest their crop; no one would build their houses. In other words, the *namahshudras* are not considered fit to receive even the minimum cooperation that is needed for living in a human society. For no fault of theirs we have made their life difficult at every step. From birth to death they are made to serve a sentence of punishment. (qtd. in Byapari 4118)

Again in the same essay, Tagore has mentioned that the main reason behind such pathetic condition is religion. He argues that "It is not human nature to stoop so low. It was religious injunction that forced people to behave like this. Men and women of our country were being tortured and discriminated against in the name of religion." (Ibid)

Although West Bengal is considered as the second largest Dalit populated state in India after Uttar Pradesh (Dalit, *Wikipedia*), the Voices of the Dalits in this state remain almost unheard compared to the other parts of the country. Even the literary contribution of Bengali Dalits on the ongoing Dalit literary Movement of the country as a whole is also still out of the interest.

On the other hand, the majority of untouchable Community of Bengal earlier was known as *Chandala*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the two Dalit leaders *Harichand*

(7)

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Thakur and *Guru Chand Thakur* from Bengal launched a social movement known as *Namashudra Movement* opposing all kinds of caste oppressions and discrimination. They also formed a new religion known as *Matua Cult* rejecting the so-called rigid rituals and religious practices of Brahmin. At a time the movement became so much powerfully built such that Dr. B.R Ambedkar, while not certified to be nominated from his own state Maharashtra, got elected in the constitute assemble in 1946 from the Bengal province. However, one year later, the partition of Bengal in 1947 did not only crush the spirit of the movement but also scattered whole *Namashudra* community in various places.

Why are Dalits of Bengal “Midnight’s Untouchable Children”?

In his famous novel “*The Midnight’s Children*”, Rushdie has described his characters Saleem Senai and Shiva, as the “Midnight’s Children” because they were born at the same night of partition of India in 1947. Correspondingly, most of the contemporary Dalits of Bengal can be categorised as the “Midnight’s Children” because they were, like Rushdie’s characters, a small child at the time of partition. After the partition, when these “untouchable children” came to India from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) due to the fear of communal violence, they found themselves as “unwanted” refugees. Therefore, these untouchable children of *Namashudra* community unknowingly became “Midnights untouchable children”.

The present study investigates Biswas's two collections of poetry *The Wheel will Turn* (2014) and *Poetic Rendering yet UNBORN* (2010) to know how the so-called “Midnight’s unwanted children” are still struggling for their existence. Being such unwanted child, Biswas is one of the leading Bengali Dalit poets and the current President of *Bangla Dalit Shahitya Sanstha*. Through his literary works, he tries to highlight the struggle of Dalits for existence and attracts attention to their everlasting misery.

Additionally, in his poem *COMRADE, I PAY A RED SALUTE*, Biswas highlights some of the major atrocities happened to the Dalits of West Bengal. Biswas describes Marichjhapi Massacre that happened in 1979 in which thousands of Dalit refugees were massacred; women were raped, and their houses were burnt when they tried to occupy one of the Islands of Sunder bans known as *Marichjhapi* (The Silence Of Marichjhapi). *Meenakshi Mukherjee* refers such massacre “as one of the darkest episode of the Bengal history. It was conveniently erased from national memory until the novelist Amitav Ghosh recreated it in vivid detail in his novel *The Hungry Tide* in 2004” (Byapari 4118).

The poet feels pity not only for the suffering of his own *Namshudra* community but also for the pathetic conditions of the Tribal community of Bengal at large. In this poem, he talks about *The Cuni Kotal* incident happened on 16 August 1992, when a tribal girl *Cuni kotal from Lodha Tribal Community of Bengal*, also a student of Vidhaya Sagar University of Mednapur district of West Bengal, became a victim of caste hatred and committed suicide (ChuniKotal). Likewise, the poet discusses Sarama sit case in which a Dalit woman was fined as she entered a temple for offering *Puja*. What has been mentioned is just emblematic

(8)

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examples of many other similar incidents such as Bharnabari incident, Birbhanpur incident, Karandighir Bhangapara, Singur and Nandigram massacre, etc. For such horrendous incidents, the poet mourns;

“Let call your name and my name
Be Marchjhapi’s days of mass massacre
Your name my name is Padmaja Mandi
And one chuni kotal”. [63]

In another poem titled “*A separated Courtyard Room*”, Biswas tries to illustrate some of the painful experiences of the Dalit refugees sprung from the partition. He shows that the Dalits who remained in East Pakistan, (now Bangladesh) became a minority in the Muslim dominated country and those who came to India crossing the new border due to the fear of communal violence and leaving their lands, houses and all material possessions behind, found themselves refugees. Such suffering was substantiated in the following lines:

“A long line between the two courtyards
Separates me (Poetic Rendering As yet UNBORN 40)

In the same poem, the poet has interestingly compared the condition of such “midnight’s unwanted children” with a fly caught in a cobweb. He says: “Like a fly caught in a cobweb / Stronger and stronger the iron hands”. (Poetic Rendering As yet UNBORN:41).

Dalit scholars of Bengal argue that unlike upper caste Hindu refugees, Dalit refugees were forcibly sent to the various barren pockets of India under the pretext of rehabilitation. In his article “*Is there any Dalit Writings in Bengal?*”, Byapari (2007), one of the “Midnight’s unwanted children” and a prominent Dalit writer of Bengal protests such partiality and the way Dalit were treated. He says:

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. (4119)

Additionally, in his next poem, “*Winter Wind Blows*” and “*Torai Deshe*”, he describes the unforgettable terrible experiences of the undressed Bengali Dalit refugees in the refugee camps during the season of winter and summer as well.

In another poem entitled “*Broken Bangles*”, Biswas regrettably compares the lives of “Midnight’s Unwanted Children” with the broken bangles. Most interestingly, the term ‘Dalit’ also means ‘broken’ and the word ‘refugee’ means a person whom everyone refuses to accept. As nobody cares of the broken bangles that are dropped down into dustbins, the poet shows that everybody wants to get rid of these Bengali Dalit refugees because they are unwelcomed people. According to the poet, sending the Dalit refugees to the various barren

(9)

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lands of the country like *Dhandakaranya* and Andaman Nicobar Island is just like throwing the broken bangles in the dustbin. They had to live under trees, on railway platforms, and on the roadsides in refugee camps. The poet says: “Lying roadside broken and uncared” [The Wheel: 67].

Even today, one can easily locate such “Midnight’s unwanted children” in the deep forest of *Dhandakaranya* of Madhya Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Island and others uninhabited pockets of India. They can also be found in the slums of *Kolkata*, nearby *Howrah*, *Sealdah*, and *Bongoa* railway stations. In the main city of Kolkata, they can be tirelessly noticed. They barefootedly pull hand rickshaw, polish shoes, clean dustbins, or fight with the street dogs for leftover foods. Thus, they are somehow surviving themselves according to the cruel theory of the struggle for existence.

As an example of their daily suffering, both men and women of Dalit refugees, who stay nearby the city, have to go to the city of Kolkata searching for their livelihood. The men work as rickshaw pullers and cleaners of the city whereas the women work as *Jhi* (maidservants). After the whole day work, they return home thinking only about their children left behind at ragged homes, which are for them as palaces. They regard their back journey as a kind of returning home after long period of expatriation. For giving a clear image about this daily suffering, the poet says: Lie around like discarded egg-sells,/ People come back home utterly destitute, with extreme emptiness.[The Wheel 29]

The Dalits of Bengal suffer not only physically but also psychologically. In his poem “*Perception*”, Biswas describes how he was sarcastically called *Sonarchand* by upper caste *Bhodroloks*. Biswas explains this Bengali term in the footnote of the same poem- “Sonar Chand literary means “golden moon” which is a sarcastic phrase used by the Bengali elites to address the Scheduled Caste, the historically deprived castes of India. It is made up of the first two initial letters of the two words in the phrase Scheduled Castes” (Biswas 31).

In the poem *Boot- Polish*, the poet describes how a proud upper caste *Bhodrolok* insulted a shoes polish Dalit boy. He says; “It was here that your mother begot you./ Your grand-ma begot your bap [Poetic Rendering As yet UNBORN:13].

However, Biswas is very much sanguine about the bright future of the Dalits in West Bengal. He believes that the spring will come in their lives after winter. In the poem *Dalit Mirror*, Biswas invokes his English Magazine *Dalit Mirror* to scatter the news of their silent sufferings everywhere. He says:

Take a small part of me and scatter everywhere

Invisible self, I will touch all five senses.

I’m no longer, where I live, [The Wheel Will Turn :42]

Conclusion:

After seven decades of independence, the majority of Dalits of West Bengal are still struggling for their existence. Sadly speaking, many of them are still landless, jobless, and

(10)

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homeless living in slums beside the rail tracks under their temporary ragged tents. On the one hand, the Dalits of Bengal, who are living outside of Bengal like *Dhandayakarana* and others states of India, still could not get rid their identity as being “untouchable refugees”. In many cases, they are deprived from the government’s reservation in terms of getting admissions and jobs due to their identity as refugees. Apart from that, they are about to lose their own typical Bengali cultural and linguistic identity as they live far from their birthplace. On the other hand, those who remain in the Bengal are somehow surviving in dire poverty, struggling day and night for their existence. Many Dalits of Bengal either don’t have or lost their identity cards which identify them as citizens of India. Consequently, they become victims of the police harassment and torture on the pretext of illegal Bangladeshi migrants. They are the real Subalterns. However, the Dalit writers of Bengal are daring to speak their bitter and terrible experiences through their writings. In her epoch making essay “*Can the subaltern Speak?*” Spivak argues that the *subaltern* cannot speak because they do not have their own tongues (Spivak). However, falsifying such theory, the subalterns of Bengal started to raise their voices apart from their struggle for existence.

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