The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking

Double-blind Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English

Vol. 4 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2024 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 1-11

www.literaryhrm.org

www.cavemarkpublications.com

Manju Bala's "The Housemaid Special": A Study in Dalit Consciousness and Resistance

Chinmoy Dey

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1187-4331

Corresponding authors: Chinmoy Dey, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Basanti Devi College, Kolkata-29, chinmoydey.eng@gmail.com

Review Article

Keywords:
Housemaid, Pocha, Dalit consciousness, resistance, casteism, patriarchy, othering, abjection

Article History
Received:
June 7, 2024
Revised:
June 20, 2024
Accepted:
July 1, 2024

Abstract

Aims: *Dalit literature in Bangla, more often than not, has been written by Dalit men. However, there is a body of Dalit literature in Bangla written by Dalit women, where gender and caste identities intersect and manifest themselves. This paper seeks to address how this complex identity politics plays out in Bangla Dalit woman writer Manju Bala's short story "The Housemaid Special".*

Methodology and Approaches: *The methodology of my research has been a close reading of the short story in question as well as a parallel reading of other Dalit literary works such as Manohar Mouli Biswas's Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal and other theoretical and critical texts on Dalit literary history and aesthetics (as cited at the end of the paper) to drive home the challenges confronting Dalit literature in bringing about material changes in Brahminical socio-political structures.*

Outcome: *Bala's story in question deftly weaves in concerns of the three axes of class, caste and gender, and exposes with a typical Dalit consciousness the muted existence of casteism in Bengal, thereby unravelling the Savarna politics of epistemic violence in silencing the Dalit voice as part of a centuries-old process of 'othering'.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Dalit literature has developed into a body that is ontologically and epistemologically productive for understanding and transforming the social and political contours of contemporary India. In order to dismantle the long-entrenched caste structure, the Dalit has to combat the ideological state apparatuses of upper-caste canonical literature that propagates Brahminical values and aesthetics and pass them off as the universal and ahistorical Hindu/Indian experience.*

***Correspondence:** Chinmoy Dey, chinmoydey.eng@gmail.com

A myth has been deliberately constructed and disseminated across West Bengal that caste does not matter in Bengal and caste discriminations or prejudices do not exist in Bengal. But the truth is that casteism has been internalized by most people of this linguistic region and so caste prejudices operate very subtly behind the facade of progressive social and cultural reforms initiated under the banner of the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. Kalyan Das contends: "….Bengali Bhadralok has been performing a very successful epistemic violence by propagating a myth that 'Dalits do not exist in Bengal'. This 'silencing' act of the Bhadralok's censor board was radically challenged by a passionate group of writer-activists. They were radically challenging the Bhadralok's infinite indifference" (8). Bangla Dalit writer and activist, Manohar Mouli Biswas ushers in a significant rupture in the mainstream, Savarna literary-cultural heritage of Bengal. Mr Biswas has been instrumental in unearthing scores of Bengal Dalit literature as the founder-member and President of Bengal Dalit Sahitya Sangstha (Bengali Dalit Literary Association) founded in 1992, and thereby exploding the popular bhadralok myth that casteism does not exist in Bengal. The existence of Bangla Dalit literature aplenty bears testimony to the 'silent' existence of caste prejudices and discrimination in Bengal despite the Bengali bhadralok's stubborn refusal to acknowledge it. One of the earliest publications is the journal *Namashudra Suhrid* from Orakandi, where the Matua cult was founded by Sri Harichand Thakur (Biswas) in 1912. The biography of Sri Harichand Thakur was composed in the form of lyrical verses by Dalit poet Tarakchandra Sarkar, and published in 1916.

Dalit literature had been born in Bengal much before the Dalit Panthers came into being in Maharashtra (in the early 1970s). East Bengal's Matua literature dates back to the British colonial era. For Manoranjan Byapari, a pioneering Bangla Dalit writer and activist, Dalit literature in Bangla took root in the 1930s and 1940s and had early precursors in movements such as the Matua Sahitya. However, Dalit creative writing encountered disruption and discontinuity following Partition, but the decades since then have witnessed an outpouring of literature that focuses on those on the margins and serves as a vehicle and repository of underprivileged angst, aimed at social justice. In his introduction to

The Wheel Will Turn (2014) entitled "The Fourth Person", Kalyan Das argues: ''The Cult of Sahajiya Vaishnavism and the leadership of Thakur Harichand-Guruchand did not just give birth to a spiritual awakening supplemented by a political awareness but also shaped a cultural discourse for the Dalits in Bengal. This 'Namasudra' / lower caste literature established the tradition of a counter-cultural narrative" (7). We find the literary and cultural representations of the marginalized and dispossessed people of India's untouchable and aboriginal communities in the writings of upper caste writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi and Premchand. These narratives 'of the margins' (rather than 'from the margins') constitute, for Dalit writers, a 'discourse of pity' – something which has little to do with Dalit consciousness. Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature as "Writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (19).

"The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature", argues Limbale, "is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle… a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus… Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery" (32). The uniqueness of Dalit literature lies in this consciousness which is ostensibly central to and permeates Manju Bala's "Jhee Special" (translated by Sanghita Sanyal as "The Housemaid Special"). Like other eminent Bangla Dalit women writers such as Kalyani Thakur Charal and Smritikana Haoladar, Manju Bala writes from an ideological position that is directly influenced by Dr B. R. Ambedkar and informed by the Marathi Dalit writings.

"The Housemaid Special" is about the struggle of Ketaki, who seems to be at the receiving end of discrimination and oppression in terms of all the three axes of class, caste and gender. Her life of indescribable hardship is predicated upon her identity as a very poor, 'lower-caste' woman. The narrative, though brief, manages to navigate through varied temporal registers and is episodic in nature. Ketaki starts from the village and is forced to move to the city with her baby son

and take shelter in a shanty. This is because she delivers the baby in the eighth month after her marriage and her husband's family confronts her with false allegations about its paternity. Patriarchal discourse thus makes its presence felt and pries Ketaki away from her matrimonial home. The woman's body is often imagined as the repository of communal/familial honour in the patriarchal imagination, and so any perceived threat to the proprietorship over the same is enough to either mutilate or disown such bodies. The latter is what happens to Ketaki, and she is left to fend for herself. However, she manages to bring up her son Pocha, enduring a life of great hardship and suffering showers of abuse from the memsahibs in whose houses she works as housemaid. As the third person narrator in the story says: "The incessant abuses of the memsahibs have hardened them into robots. How much more one could wring out than another became a competitive factor between one flat and the other" (Bala 19). In a speech delivered to women present at the famous Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, Ambedkar pungently argues:

> The task of ending Untouchability is a Woman's question. You gave birth to us and you know how people grade us and treat us even lower than animals…. When you know this all how would you answer people who will raise questions about why you gave birth to us all? What is the difference between children born to Kayastha and other Savarna women sitting in this meeting and us? You must think and realize that you have as much character and purity as a brahman woman. In fact, the courage and will to act that you possess, even the brahman woman lacks' (Rege 70).

Perhaps this conviction in her self-worth and the suffering she undergoes make Ketaki even more determined. She has a clear vision of how she and Pocha can combat the stigma associated with their caste and class identity. The 'lower-caste' subject is blind, and it is education that provides an antidote to this blindness, a theme that runs through many Dalit narratives. Ketaki takes great pains to ensure Pocha gets a decent education. However, the school is seen not to be a neutral, democratic space where education can be acquired by all deserving candidates; it fosters the stereotypes that pervade the world outside. Pocha's name results in his

getting teased by the other boys in school. Ketaki, nonetheless, convinces him that education and economic well-being is the key: "When you become highly educated, when you have a big job, they can never tease you again', she explains (Bala 21).

The story seems to highlight as it meanders to its unfortunate climax that faith is not always strong enough to move mountains; it needs to be buttressed by concrete, affirmative social action, which unfortunately is not always in evidence. The question of reservation emerges, and the myth of meritocracy is regurgitated by Pocha's fellow students. Pallav, for instance, is heard telling another friend, Biplab, that they “pass the Joint Entrance through reservations and become quacks and killer doctors" - an argument most of us in contemporary Bengal and India have probably heard at least once - in one single blow it seeks to discredit the reservation system, challenge its very need, highlight an "unfair" advantage that the reservation system is seen to give those who have been disadvantaged for generations, ghettoise all those who have benefitted from the reservation system, and their own hard work to establish themselves and stereotype them as unskilled, inefficient and killers.

The narrative of "The Housemaid Special" also evokes the hierarchy between city and village with Pocha's friends advising him to return to the village and take up the plough. Yet, even as Dalit narratives highlight such instances and patterns of discrimination and intimidation, they go on to move far beyond merely painting portraits of martyrdom. The protagonists of Dalit narratives such as "The Housemaid Special" emerge as survivors whose resolve has only been strengthened by the oppression they have faced; they are agents of their destiny and heralds of social change. This is precisely why characters like Pocha refuse to buckle to the psychological violence perpetrated by his upper-caste schoolmates. Pallav, for instance, comes down heavily on Pocha with all his casteist slurs: “Arrey, you all have disgraced your forefathers and left your ancestral profession; you all don’t want to continue farming. Have we left our age-old professions? He pulls out the sacred thread and shows it off…. Now don’t waste your time but go back to your village and pick up the plough” (Bala 22). In fact, Pocha comes to

Haran's rescue when the latter is driven by this intimidation to the point of giving up his studies. He explains to Haran that dropping out would only mean doing what their oppressors would want them to do; it would ensure that the status quo of power, social, political and economic, would continue undisturbed.

Pocha's childhood memories of his village and of Bamunipishi's words and acts haunt him. Bamunipishi's allegations of Pocha having polluted the bathing ghat and spoilt the water of her pitcher made him wonder how he might have tainted the pitcher water without ever touching it. Pocha's Dida (mother's mother) scolded him: "They are our elders, our gods. If we touch them, then they are tainted and fallen. It becomes our sin. Then we have to endure punishment in hell after death" (Bala 23). Dalits are both desired and repelled by the upper caste Hindu. Dalits enable the purity of upper caste Hindu society by doing manual scavenging, skinning dead animals and removing the carcasses, and thereby becoming 'impure' in the process. The relationship of desire and revulsion resulting from the upper caste Hindu's 'fixation' with purity and cleanliness, can be read, as observed by Alok Mukherjee, "in terms of the popular psychological framework of desire and taboo, utilized by postcolonial theorists such as Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Robert Young" (Limbale 3). This play of desire and revulsion can also be understood in terms of Julia Kristeva's theorizing of the notion of the 'abject' in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). According to Kristeva:

> What is abject… is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master (2).

For the upper caste Hindu, the Dalit is a community abject, a 'something' that the former does not recognize as a 'thing', a meaningless weight which 'crushes' the former (Kristeva 2), a spectral reality which, once acknowledged by the upper caste Hindu, shall annihilate their illusory feudal status of power and hegemony. The Dalit abject constitutes the very 'self' of the upper caste Hindu. The Dalit is

abjectified through the upper caste Hindu's recognition of their 'want' of the Dalit's labour for its graceful survival because "all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (Kristeva 5).

While examining Barbara Creed's reworking of Kristeva's notion of the abject in relation to the horror film, Shohini Chaudhuri writes: "Although the abject is, ultimately part of ourselves, we reject it, expelling it and locating it outside the self, designating it as 'not-me', in order to protect our boundaries" (92-93). Upper caste Hindu society 'banishes' or 'expels' the Dalit abject 'outside the self', branding it as 'not-me' or 'other' – an ontological 'othering' of the Dalit which can be read in terms of Hegel's famous Master-Slave dialectic. The unequal relationship between a master and a slave is established and entrenched through a battle that ends only when the slave grants recognition and service to the Master in return for a life of servitude over death at the hand of the Master, who, however, finds this victory pointless and hollow precisely because this recognition from the Slave's end is not spontaneous and free, rather forced. Thus, the Savarna Hindu Master's access to his own selfhood is mediated through his relationship to the Dalit Slave. And since that Slave is "not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one", the Master "is, therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself" (Hegel 545). Thus, by doing away with the Slave's independence, the Master has obliterated the very "other" through whom he could have achieved selfhood. Hegel sees this reciprocity of dependence as central to human relationships: "They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another" (Hegel 542). If the upper caste Hindu is seriously willing to acknowledge that the Dalit other is also a self with a need and a right to be a being-for-self, then the former can meaningfully establish his own selfhood, not in a mutually exclusive way but as an all-encompassing whole or entity.

The fact that Pocha is isolated, ostracised, discriminated against, and humiliated even in an educational institution seems to be a sharp pointer to a flawed education system: one that has perhaps not yet been able to instill basic human values in the minds of the "educated". This contention is perhaps further

corroborated by the way the narrator posits the village world against the city world as the narrative travels between the two worlds. Pocha finds little difference between the thoughts of the rustic, illiterate people in the village and the so-called educated people in the city as far as the caste system is concerned. This seems to foreground the fact that perhaps the educational space, which has the potential to combat the workings of caste, has itself failed to remain immune to caste prejudices and casteist discourse. The end of the story shows Pocha getting humiliated in his workplace, a higher secondary school in south Kolkata, where he is allowed neither to sit in the teachers' room nor to take his classes, which are assigned to a Class IV staff as "Pocha is the only SC teacher" in the school (Bala 25). He is also beaten up by some students of the school, suggesting the punishment meted out to him, for being an untouchable Dalit and daring to enter a noble profession, presumably by the machinations of his upper caste colleagues. Thus, Manju Bala's "The Housemaid Special" seems to interrogate in its own way the popular idea that education would suffice to fight the casteist stereotypes and discrimination. The reader is provoked to think even if the Dalit becomes literate, will their destiny of belonging to an untouchable Shudra caste ever change since caste is an enclosed unit or class with no internal social mobility as such, determined or accessible only by birth, a feudal structure that is legitimised by the Brahmanical scriptural edicts? Economic determinism may be instrumental in class mobility but this probably does not apply to caste. Manohar Mouli Biswas' life narrative *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* echoes the same penetrating, polemical insight when Manohar's jetha (father's elder brother) quite hopelessly asserts:

> Will our children be able to become Babus if they are educated? They cannot, they cannot, they cannot! Even if our children get educated, they won't be able to become Babus. They will have to do manual labour, they will have to hold onto the butt of the plough - such is the inscription in the scriptures by the Gods. (*Surviving* 4)

During his 25 December 1927 speech at Mahad satyagraha, Ambedkar's declaration contains the candid solution to this structural inequality through radical societal reform:

> If Hindu society is to be strengthened, we must uproot the four-caste system and untouchability, and set the society on the foundations of the two principles of one caste only and of equality. The way to abolish untouchability is not any other than the way to invigorate Hindu society… To bring about a real social revolution. (Dangle 268)

The French anthropologist Louis Dumont defines human beings as Homo hierarchicus. Hence, we find power-wielding people are always unwilling to let go of their hereditary privileges. Though the Indian Constitution granted the status of equality to all its citizens regardless of caste, class and gender, it "remains an unfinished agenda, a utopia against the ground reality" (Krishnaraj xii). Hence in order to dismantle this long-entrenched caste structure founded on the status-quo-and-hegemony-maintaining ideology or 'false consciousness' as Marx defines it, the Dalit has to combat the ideological state apparatuses (a notion propounded by the French structuralist Marxist, Louis Althusser) of Savarna or upper caste canonical literature that propagates Savarna values and aesthetics and pass them off as the universal and ahistorical Hindu/Indian experience.

Works Cited and Consulted

Biswas, Manohar Mouli. *The Wheel Will Turn*. Edited by Jaydeep Sarangi, Cyberwit.net, 2014.

… *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*. Translated and Edited by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi, Samya, 2015.

Charal, Kalyani Thakur & Dasgupta, Sayantan, eds. Dalit Lekhika: Women's Writings from Bengal. Stree, 2020.

Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. Routledge, 2006.

Dangle, Arjun, editor. *Poisoned Bread*. Orient BlackSwan, 2009.

Das, Kalyan. "The Fourth Person". *The Wheel Will Turn: Poems by Manohar Mouli Biswas*, edited by Jaydeep Sarangi, Cyberwit.net, 2014, pp. 7-12.

Dey, Chinmoy. "Manohar Mouli Biswas' *The Wheel Will Turn*: A Study in Dalit Consciousness". Gnosis, edited by Saikat Banerjee, Yking Books, vol. 5, no. 3, April 2019, pp. 95-107.

Hegel, Georg W. F. "Phenomenology of Spirit", translated by A. V. Miker. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al., 2nd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Krishnaraj, Maithreyi. "A Note from the Series Editor". *Gendering Caste*, by Uma Chakravarti, Revised ed., Sage / Stree, 2018, pp. ix-xiv.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

Mukherjee, Alok. "From Erasure to Assertion". *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. By Sharankumar Limbale, Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste / Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*, Zubaan, 1999.

Chinmoy Dey

Chinmoy Dey, M.A., M.Phil (English), B.Ed, has been working as Assistant Professor of English (in a UGC substantive post) at Basanti Devi College, 147B Rash Behari Avenue, Kolkata - 700029. Before joining this College, he had worked as HoD in the substantive post of Assistant Professor in English, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis Mahavidyalaya, Bonhooghly, Kolkata - 700108. He did his M.Phil on Romantic Orientalism and India. He has published papers in national and international journals of repute. His areas of interest include British Romantic poetry, Dalit literary and cultural studies, and feminism and gender studies, postcolonialism and literary ecology. He loves to compose poems, short stories, memoirs, nonfictional prose pieces, and in myriad other subgenres.