Transcript: An e-Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies
e-ISSN: 2582-9858
Vol. 2, No. 1, January-June 2022, 60-70
https://doi.org/10.53034/Transcript.2022.v02.n01.004

Dahankal: A Subaltern Speaks Aesthetically

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Abstract

This essay explores the theme of the Bengali novel *Dahankal* and places it in the Dalit literary corpus of Bengal. To do this a historical survey in the field of Dalit literature of Bengal is presented along with an explanation of the phrase 'Dalit Literature' which first occurred in the context of Maratha literature. In this essay, the theme of *Dahankal* is analyzed first from the historical and then from the linguistic perspective. The historical time the novel depicts is the 1960s and early 1970s when erstwhile East Pakistan faced the military onslaught of the Pakistani army. The character of the protagonist is developed through his gradual consciousness of being a Dalit thrust upon him by the cruel society around him. The language invented by the novelist, as any successful Dalit writer, is analyzed from the angle of Dalit psychology. Finally, as for Bengali literature is concerned, *Dahankal*, or any Dalit writing, is absorbed in the mainstream literary corpus despite Dalit Literature being a class in itself.

Keywords: Dalit, Subaltern, Bengali Dalit Literature, Dahankal, Fishing community.

Perhaps a couple of decades ago the phrase 'Bengali Dalit Literature' might have caused a rising of the brows of most of the connoisseurs of literature – is there anything called 'Bengali Dalit Literature?' Also, how can *Dahankal* be called 'Dalit literature' since its writer is an established teacher at a government college? To clarify these questions I first analyse the phrase 'Bengali Dalit literature' and then locate the exact position of *Dahankal* in this class. It must be declared at the outset that I make no separation between the literary output of the two Bengals, i.e. Bangladesh and West Bengal in India simply because both are written in the same language representing the same cultural construct. *Dahankal* is a novel about the fishing community of

Patenga in Chattogram in Bangladesh. This novel is to be placed in the same category as *Padmanadir Majhi* (1936), *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (written in 1950 but published posthumously in 1956) and *Ganga* (1957) written by litterateurs of both the Bengals.

Coming to the phrase 'Bengali Dalit literature', we must say that as it is in Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh in India Dalit literature till yesteryears was not a much-established nomenclature in Bengali literature. But that does not mean that no Dalits or marginalized communities existed or were represented here. Even as early as in the 14th century we find upper caste and class (together denoting the socio-economic position) people writing about those subalterns or marginalized. The poets of the Mangalakavyas wrote about them. Examples can be cited from the *Chandimangala* where a low-caste hunter's life is portrayed with the utmost fidelity and the poet, Mukundaram Chakraborty, is a Brahmin by caste. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay – a Brahmin and Deputy Magistrate – wrote in powerful prose about poor peasantry irrespective of religion in his essay 'Bangadeser Krishok' (1887), Dinabandhu Mitra – Kayastha and government official - wrote an epoch-making play*, Neeldarpan* (1860) about the destitute peasants' suffering and struggling under the British Indigo planters or Mir Mussaraf Hossain –an upper-class Muslim wrote a play called *Zameedardarpan* (1871) about poor peasants. But these cannot be called Dalit literature because Dalits were not the authors of those texts and, most importantly, Dalit sentiments are seen there from above. The question that comes next is: who are the Dalits? The phrase 'Dalit Literature' is a Maharashtrian coinage after the name of the aggressive 'Dalit Panthers'. The term 'Dalit', in the beginning, indicated only the lowest castes of Hindu society who are untouchable to the Savarna or upper-caste Hindus. But later Adivasis or the indigenous people and extremely poor and downtrodden other castes are also called Dalits.

As the Dalits had no access to the traditional education system they could not read or write anything. They first got the impetus to express themselves, among others, from Jyotiba Fule and Ambedkar who tried to eradicate the curse of untouchability by launching an effective struggle against this social menace. Their influence was first felt in Maharastra where a large group of Dalit activists formed a literary circle. Ambedkar published a magazine called *Mooknayaka*, the spokesman of the dumb and silent mass. Though gradually some differences of opinion developed among those writers Dalit literature is almost unanimously regarded as the work of a person who comes from the Dalit community depicting the life of Dalit people[1].

Bengali literature, unlike its counterpart in Marathi, Kannad or Hindi, cannot boast of hosts of Dalit writers. Even the term ‘Dalit’ was unfamiliar in the Bengali literary arena a couple of decades ago. The Bengalis thought for a suitable term to translate the word ‘subaltern’ when the word knocked at the door of Bengali literary criticism. They prefer to use the term ‘Nimnabarga’ (a sophisticated expression for ‘lower class’) to indicate the subaltern, while some like Mihir Sengupta of *Bishadbrikkha* (2005) would prefer ‘Aparbarga’ in its stead. However, from the first decade of the 21st century, the term 'Dalit’ is an acceptable term to the Bengalis keeping in mind the big corpus of literature on the Indian subcontinent. Writers belonging to Dalit communities are not great in number as writers from other castes. Among Bengali litterateurs casteism is generally a factor to be criticized and certainly not to be basking under its influence. Thus nobody takes into account the caste of the writer of 'Mahesh', a much-anthologized Bengali short story written about an extremely underprivileged father and his daughter. The story is about a poor Muslim, Gafur, whose only possession is an ox that he named Mahesh which is another name for the Hindu god Shiva. And this is written by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, a Brahmin by caste. What I want to drive at is the simple fact that the Bengali

literary atmosphere is never vitiated with casteism, unlike its Marathi counterpart. *Dahankal*, as stated earlier, is an in-depth portrayal of a marginalized fishing community of erstwhile East Pakistan written by one belonging to that community. In this sense, this book is a true Dalit work. Previously, we have a similar Dalit work in Bengali literature about the fishing community of East Bengal called *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* by Adwaita Mallabarman who belonged to the same community he depicted. A novel called *Patal Kolkata* about homeless pavement dwellers, written between the late 1960s and early 1970s is called Dalit literature in its advertisement, though the writer, Guru Biswas, does not belong to the marginalized class. Manoranjan Byapari is perhaps the most famous Dalit writer of present-day Bengali literature. Coming from the Namasudra community tortured and humiliated through a greater part of his life for caste and class, Manoranjan, a refugee from erstwhile East Pakistan, has been writing short stories, novels- and also a wonderful memoir named *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012)- for years. Many Dalit writers started writing in the late 20th century and Oxford Press has decided to publish an anthology of their writings[2]. Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha was established in 1992 at the initiative of Manoharmouli Biswas and other Dalit writers of Bengal. Less than a year ago the Government of West Bengal formed the Dalit Sahitya Academy headed by Manoranjan Byapari.

The historical period of *Dahankal* is from the nineteen sixties to seventy-one. It starts with a seven-year-old's being admitted to a lower primary standard and ends in 1971 when West Pakistan unleashed terror on East Pakistan. The novel begins with a boy's or rather his family's struggle for upliftment – an upliftment which is to be cultural, the boy's being initiated into the arena of literacy. His father, Radhanath, also unlike anyone in his fishing community, started studying with the only literate man, Jatindramohan, in his community, but had to leave his studies after one year as his widowed mother, Chandrakala, had fallen ill. He now sends his son

to a teacher. In the narrative is portrayed a large canvas of the life of this fishing community. Haridas sits for his school-leaving examination and along with other families around struggles against hunger and humiliation. By this time the martial onslaught of West Pakistan comes on their village. The males are tortured and many women are raped. Haridas and others take revenge on a group of soldiers stationed near their village which resulted in a total burning down of the fishermen's colony. Haridas's crippled father and old grandmother are killed. When the Pakistani soldiers have left Haridas, coming up to his father who once, while taking him to a primary school, said: 'My son, walk faster', shouts: "O my father, I will keep to your words. I will walk faster and faster ahead."(*Dahankal* 176, translation mine)

In *Dahankal* history is developed from two angles: one on a national level, the other on a cultural level. The national history is known to all— the Pakistani military attack on the Bengalis of East Pakistan. The cultural history reveals the Dalit's struggle throughout his life – against poverty, caste discrimination, deception and torture mitigated upon him by the upper caste and class people. Haridas creates history by establishing himself as a literate person, taking revenge on the Pakistani soldiers, and finally taking an oath to stride forward in a symbolic way. If *Dahankal* is to be aesthetically appreciated according to Dalit standards of aesthetics we have to mention categorically the Dalit aesthetic norms. Dalitness is a feature which is not exclusive to the Indian subcontinent, it can be found in African American and Native American literature and that of the Aborigines of Australia and New Zealand. The Dalitness in all these kinds of literature, including Indian, reveals the suffering of the subalterns, their anger and a final physical or symbolic victory or its hope for such a victory. Elaborate theorizing of Dalit aesthetics in English is done by Sharankumar Limbale, himself a Dalit writer of Maharastra in his book on Dalit aesthetics. Articles and books on Dalit aesthetics have been published earlier

by critics of no small importance. Mahasweta Devi is the most famous Bengali literary voice on subaltern life, but she also stops short of the Dalit experience. Manoranjan Byapari gives the example of Premchand to explain this. He refers to Munshi's famous short story 'Kafan' where two Doms (men whose profession is cremation or burial of dead bodies), Ghishu and Madhav, father and son, manage some money to buy shroud for the dead but they spend the money on liquor. Despite Premchand's profuse and unique handling of Dalit themes, Byapari declares that as the writer is a Kayastha he fails to portray the Dalit sentiment in this story. He says that if any Dalit writes that story for a second time he would never finish the story in that way. Instead, a Dalit would write that as the father and son went to buy the shroud they smelt boiling rice in a hotel and would remember that they had not taken rice for a long time. One of them would say to the other: the dead is dead, let us live at least once, let us take some rice. (Byapari 444) Premchand's 'Kafan' is often subject to rereading by the Dalits. The writer must himself undergo a Dalit experience, he must not see from above. What non-Dalit writers can produce is only sympathy literature. Dalit literature is composed from a sociological point of view, the popular belletrist notion of literature is rejected here. The narrative or discourse tells about the sufferings of the Dalits. They are considered the 'Others', residing at the farthest end of a settlement, a village or a town. In the larger Indian context, they are mostly separated by untouchability. They are necessities of society but must be segregated in social life. Canonical Indian mythical stories accept their existence but reject the concept of equality concerning them. All advancements are denied to them. Sambuka in The Ramayana is killed by Rama for studying the scriptures(the Ramayana, Uttarkanda, section 76); Ekalavya has to forego his thumb for surpassing Arjun's archery skills(the Mahabharata, Adiparva, chapter 132). The story of the Dalit is rightly called a lofty image of grief. (Limbale 30)

Another important object is the language of Dalit literature. Throughout the world, oppressed subaltern people have started writing about themselves mainly after the Second World War. African American writers, though started writing much earlier, are now writing in a drastically changed tone. The Dalits are using the established language pattern of their respective tongues, which though set to the tongue of the upper caste, rejects its phraseology. Their writings are a minute mimetic representation of their livelihood. These details remain inaccessible even to the sympathetic and progressive upper caste writers. The details are sometimes crude to the point of being uncivil according to established standards, but the lingual representation is realistic. The vernacular of the common people is represented in these literary works. The framework of *Dahankal* is established in Bengali, often called *'Guru Kripa'* or 'correct language', but the dialogues including body language express the common man's mindset. Language is very important for a Dalit discourse or narrative. The problem a Dalit writer faces here is two-fold: he has to use his tormentor's language because it is the latter who has set the language pattern which is the only option for a Dalit to become literate, and yet he has to express his and his community's experience through the torturers' medium. A successful Dalit writer overcomes this problem by taking up the rein of the language in his hand. He drastically changes it and finally invents a language that is his own using the same alphabet and words used by his tormentor. The tone is changed, and new phraseology is invented. Haridas, the protagonist, clearly explains the otherness of the fishermen. He says that the Pakistani soldiers call them Hindu-Malaoon[3], their Bengali sycophants dogmatize them as an Indian spy, Razakars[4] call them Doms, and the Hindus disown them as being simply fishermen (Jaladas 159). His father wanted him to be a literate person but does not want to give up his caste identity. He says to his wife about his son: 'I don't want him to be a fish-killing fisherman, I shall make him a literate fisherman' (*Dahankal* 12,

translation mine). The mother supports him: 'You have rightly spoken. We shall make at least one of our sons literate.'(*Dahankal* 12, translation mine) In a profound but simple manner Khu-U Buijya, an obscure country pariah, grieves: 'My grandfather had a fishing net, a large one, the sea ate him up. My father was torn by calamities. He could not do anything. My life is spent in a void.' (*Dahankal* 31, translation mine)

Dalit literature is never belletrist literature because the experience a writer writes about is not a pleasure-giving one. As the experience is bitter the writer's fidelity to truth cannot allow simple pleasure to percolate through his writing. Sharankumar Limbale refers to the age-old Indian aesthetic theory of Satyam-Shivan-Sundaram in the context of Dalit literature. Rightfully he points out that what is truthful, holy and beautiful for the upper caste is just the other way round for the Dalits. (Limbale 28) Limbale's reference is to the age-old established myths of the upper caste Hindus which are to be replaced by present-day Dalit-friendly myths. The fishermen in *Dahankal* rewrite such myths. Radhagovinda, a fisherman, asks an elderly man of his community, 'We are low caste to the Brahmins, to the Kayasthas, even to the barbers. And now our same-caste brethren, the Kaibartas, say that we are low caste. Uncle, then are we really of low caste?'(Jaladas 58, translation mine). Then Harbansi, Haridas's maternal grandfather, cites the name of Vyasdeva, the supposed writer of the Mahabharata and himself a character of it,

who, a fisherwoman-born, wrote the Gita which is the prized scripture of the upper caste. Are they, belonging to the same caste as Vyasadeva, lower caste people? Harbansi asks (Jaladas 58). Deriding casteism he sings the songs of Lalan, a famous outcast Hindu monk (Jaladas 58-59).

The fishermen also fight for a national cause. Radhanath, a fisherman tortured and disabled by the Pakistani soldiers, hears his father-in-law lamenting his misfortune. Admitting his pain and disability he says that in comparison to thousands of Bengalis who are dedicating their lives to

the country's freedom his pain is negligible. He is tortured because of the freedom movement and he dedicates his physical abilities to the freedom of the country (Jaladas 166). Like any Dalit fiction, *Dahankal* rises above mere pleasure-giving literature by dealing with serious socio-historic problems.

A Dalit writer's composition is revolutionary because as he has some social responsibilities he has a commitment to it. Alok Mukherjee comments that a Dalit writer does not either hide or romanticize (Limbale 13). A Dalit writer's personal experience that he achieves himself and the knowledge that he traditionally carries in his blood does not let him hide any truth. By romanticizing, Mukherjee perhaps means sugar-coating, hence, in a way, falsifying. But one of the most important significances of romanticism is the desire to strive beyond. In this sense every Dalit writing is romantic. Almost at the beginning of *Dahankal,* the seven-year-old protagonist is thinking of a large firmament full of a constellation, a wide horizon, field full of butterflies (Jaladas 10). Is it not romantic? Referring to the love and care of Basumati, his mother, the novelist finds the analogy of the sun and a bud most suitable. As the morning sun softly enlivens a peeping bud, a blossom, Basumati's love and care for her husband and mother-in-law brighten up their lives. This is romanticism. In his commitment to his dead father at the end of the novel, Haridas by surpassing every limit becomes a true romantic as he vows to his dead father that he will walk more steadily towards the future (Jaladas 176). There is no falsification in his commitment, it is honestly romantic. Like almost all Dalit discourse *Dahankal* is absorbed in the mainstream literature. From the post-independence period onwards the Dalit writers have gradually become more accepted in general society. Mukherjee calls it both part of and apart from mainstream literature (Limbale 9). Indeed Dalit literature is a part of

mainstream literature because it enriches the latter. But it is also apart in the sense that it is a class in itself.

END NOTES

(1) In his pioneering work on Dalit aesthetics Sharankumar Limbale, a Dalit writer himself, clearly puts down the idea of Dalit literature in the second chapter of his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. He writes: "By Dalit literature I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness."(Limbale 19) He further elaborates on this concept in chapter 7 of his book: "Dalit literature is that literature, which is written by one who is Dalit by birth, which is filled with rebellion and rejection, and which gives expression to Dalit consciousness."(Limbale 105)

(2) Here a reference to *Alo-Andhari* (2004), a memoir by Baby Halder, needs some mention. Baby does not have a casteist Dalit background, but she left home with her three children at a very young age to escape from the torture of her husband. After slaving as a maid in some households she finally found a sympathetic home with a teacher, Probodhkumar, grandson of Premchand, who made her write her memoir. Baby's struggle in a hostile world makes her acquire the title "more Dalit than the Dalits"(M. Biswas 67). Though Alo-Andhari, translated into at least a dozen of languages, may not be a Dalit's work, but a memoir written by a housemaid working against all odds deserves special mention.

(3) Malaoon is a word degradingly used for a non-Muslim person.

(4) Rajakar means a volunteer, but it is a pejorative term in Bangladesh as it is the name of a para-military force organized by the Pak Army in East Pakistan to identify the freedom fighters during the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971.

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Conflict of Interest Declaration:
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest about the research, authorship and publication of this article.