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The Subaltern Can Speak: A Reading of Manohar Mouli Biswas's Autobiography Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal

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Abstract

Dalit literature as a form of resistance literature strongly rejects the hegemony of caste, power and tradition through which the dominant aesthetics and ideology of the Brahminical literature silenced the untouchable 'Other' for generations. It is the literature of anger, protest, resistance and rejection against the marginalization of the Outcaste as a subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay Can the Subaltern Speak? argues the impossibility of the subaltern to speak without being appropriated to the dominant language or discourse or mode of representation and any effort on the part of the marginalized subaltern to recover their voices, identity and individuality have to be compromised. But through Dalit literature the Dalit subaltern has marked their presence not as a mute, voiceless speaking subject, but as an angry, protesting subaltern speaker whose voice will no longer be controlled or subjugated by any dominant power or authority of the Centre. The present paper aims to explore how Manohar Mouli Biswas' autobiography Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal (Translated into English from Bengali by Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi and Angana Dutta) plays a subversive role to Spivak's notion of subaltern voice. The article also throws some substantial light on Biswas' journey from the margin to the Centre against the repressive mechanism of power, caste and tradition that seeks to silence the voice of the marginalized under the monopoly of the dominant ideology of mainstream Bengali 'bhadralok' culture and society.

Key Words: Subaltern, Hegemony, Marginalization, Dalit refugee, Erasure, Bhadrakok, Dalit- Consciousness, Partition, Caste discrimination.

The word 'subaltern' literally means 'a military officer of inferior rank'. Since Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci used the term in his *The Prison Notebooks*, the term 'subaltern' gained currency and momentum in post- colonial literary theory and literary studies. In post- colonial literary framework the term 'subaltern' denotes to persons who are

outside the hegemonic power structure in terms of social, political and cultural relation to the Centre. Ranjit Guha in his *Preface to Subaltern Studies (Vol I)* remarked:

... it is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South- Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, gender, office or in any other way.(Guha vii)

In Indian social framework caste dictates and controls the marginalization of a larger social group which is known as Dalits, the lowest among the caste hierarchies. They are the most deprived and marginalized because of their untouchability, impurity and social ambivalence. When the subaltern in Western literary discourse is thought to be socially and politically marginalized social group without voice and identity, Dalits in Indian social background are silenced and relegated to the margins due to the hegemony of caste stigma, class inequality and gender subordination. From this perspective 'subaltern' and 'Dalit' can be found to share the same premise- both refers to a marginalized social group and their relation to Centre in terms of power and authority. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* questions the very role of power and authority in the mechanism of silencing the 'Other' in post- colonial literary discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak because they do not have any tongue or any intellectual power. When the marginalized voices are silenced and kept mute and 'invisible' by the Centre, a question is often found to dislodge our mind whether the subaltern can speak. The Centre can suppress the voice of the marginalized, but cannot continue silencing them forever. The discovery of the self and the realization of their own voice empowered them to question the hegemony of caste and power in their life of perpetual subordination and oppression. Their new voice is no longer the voice of the meek, subordinate creature, but is full of revolt, artistic creativity and above all subaltern pride.

Untouchability and caste oppression marginalized shudras and atishudras perpetually. This practice of caste discrimination has been a part of the Indian social framework since the Vedic times. Rig Vedas outlined four categories of caste in Hindu society and this caste discrimination attained its stupendous notoriety with the publication of *The Manusmriti*. This social stratification and segregation on the line of religion ultimately gives birth to two isolated worlds of the haves and have-nots. Only an organizational movement through voice and resistance can bring cataclysmic changes against the monopoly of caste and power that tried to segregate them perpetually as a subaltern. In West Bengal this organizational movement gets momentum with the setting up of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1992 after the tragic demise of Chuni Kotal, a tribal student of Vidyasagar University. Long before the establishment of this organization, Dalit writings in Bengal suffered a complete erasure monopolized by the upper caste Marxist '*bhadraloks*' by rejecting the existence of caste discrimination in the mainstream Bengali society. But a close look into the social structure of Bengali society will reveal a sordid account of the exploitation of the atishudras in the name of caste and religion. In traditional Bengali society the untouchables are exploited and humiliated under different marginalized social groups- the Namashudras, the Doms, the Malos, the Dhopas, the Hadis, the Paundra- Kshatriyas, the Rajbanshis and many

others. This presence of caste discrimination and marginalization of the Namashudra people in West Bengal in the beginning of the twentieth century, finds an appropriate expression in an essay of Rabindranath Tagore:

I saw in the villages that no other caste would plough the land owned by the namashudras; no one would harvest their crop; no one would build their houses. In other words, the namashudras 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)

The orthodoxical and traditional Hindu society practices casteism in terms of religion. In the same essay Tagore has remarked that religion is the root cause behind such marginalization and exploitation:

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 the name of religion. (Ibid)

This hegemony of 'religious injunction' gives birth to Matua movement in Bengal in a more radical form against suppression and oppression of any kind. This reaction against oppression and the subsequent birth of Matua movement which had its driving force in Harichand Biswas and his son Guruchand Biswas, is regarded as the first organized Dalit movement in Bengal.

The rejection and denial of the existence of Dalit literature in Bengali by savarna 'bhadralok' writers have witnessed a gradual upsurge through an imaginative and intellectual creativity with a rebellious voice against the hegemony of caste oppression and social inequality. This voice of rebellion and resistance finds an emphatic expression in Dalit life narratives or autobiographies. Autobiography as a potent form of literary expression seeks to dismantle the existing literary structures through the voice of resistance against the oppressive mechanism of power, caste and tradition. Bengali Dalit writers who have registered their reaction against the oppressive systems of society and have significantly contributed to the awakening of Dalit consciousness among the downtrodden through their life narratives are Raicharan Sardar, Bonomali Goswami, Anil Ranjan Biswas, Dr. Manoranjan Sarkar, Jatin Bala, Manoranjan Byapari, Gopal Hira, Manohar Mouli Biswas and many more. While Jatin Bala's *Shikor Chhera Jiban* (2010) and Manoranjan Byapari's *Ittibritye Chandal Jiban* (2012) presents a painful account of their life of deprivation and marginalization as Dalit refugees in Partitioned Bengal, Manohar Mouli Biswas' life narrative *Amar Bhubane Ami Bneche Thaki* (2013), translated into English as *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015) painfully delineates the subordination and subjugation of a Dalit Namashudra community in the pre and post-Partitioned Bengal under the crushing power of poverty, starvation, caste discrimination and

untouchability. His life narrative is the outcome of pain, a pain 'of being belittled, of being unwanted, of being enslaved'. Biswas himself narrates in the *Preface* of his autobiography:

My world is of great pain, one of being pitied by others ...this world of mine is the Dalit's world of poverty, the world of keeping the Dalits powerless, the Dalit's world of sickness, the world of spending childhood in malnutrition, the world of being unwanted, the world of jealousy- violence- hatred- abuse, the world of the multitudes staying alive, gasping. (Biswas, xix)

His life narrative is told in retrospect, which leads the readers to a world of distress, deprivation and marginalization of his life and his community under the complex dynamics of caste and tradition. It is an account of his journey from the margin to the Centre, an account of his growing up amidst social ostracism and deprivation. Biswas himself narrates:

This autobiography is a document of growing up amidst deprivation. It is a document of almost losing in life; touching the margins and then again stepping back among humans. (Biswas, 79)

Biswas's autobiography *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* serves as a testimony to the heart- wrenching and agonizing pictures of poverty, hunger, starvation and caste discrimination in the life of Namashudra community. Illiteracy, poverty and starvation are deeply rooted in their existence since time immemorial and marked a visible scar of existential crisis on their faces. It becomes their daily battles for survival against the onslaught of poverty and social deprivation. Their simple life is constantly monitored by the demand for food and clothes. Cut off from the mainstream society, their existence of perpetual subordination and marginalization helps to form their own isolated and alienated world. Their life is uneventful and it is poignantly compared with the life of a 'kachuripana', a water hyacinth which lives 'on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life'. Such a grim and sordid picture of poverty, hunger, illiteracy and slavery finds an apt poetical expression in one of Biswas's poem *Offering on Netaji's Centenary*:

In this room my father lived, and even before, grandfather too
...they were all slaves ...all slaves from birth

Illiterate ...hungry people ...child labourers, all were we

Marching kadam kadam barhaeja, kadam kadam barhae ja (The Wheel Will

Turn: 60)

Biswas painfully depicts the differences in life styles and opportunities between people living on the shores of two rivers- Kali and Bhairab. Unlike Moolghar village on the bank of the river Bhairab, the village of Biswas is without road, electricity, transportation, school and many modern fittings and fixtures. This differences and discriminations attracted the childish mind in him to question the reason behind their neglected and marginalized status. Biswas narrates how the middlemen of the rich exploited them at the cost of their daily wants and needs. The poor people have to sell rice and jute in cheap rates for it will ensure the daily necessities like oil, salt, clothes etc. Their life under extreme poverty is their

eternal tradition. They get this kind of life as a heritage handed down to them through many generations:

We are used to eating parboiled rice of coarse grains. With the rice, innumerable fish out of the wetlands and canals, kochu- leaf (taro) preparation, fried shapla with small prawns or fish, formed our diet and we felt it was our eternal tradition. We had become experts in living a life of this kind as a heritage handed down to us through many generations. (Biswas, 75)

One of the most powerful weapons that can dismantle the hegemony of caste, poverty and illiteracy is the all-pervasive force of education. But Biswas posits his journey of education through many debates and clashes which in fact presents the stance of his community regarding the value of education. The conflict goes on between the illiterate father and grandfather at one hand and his Jetha (father's elder brother) on the other. To Jetha, for getting educated and securing a dignified position in an upper caste Hindu society is a far- fetched dream for the children of the Dalit Namashudra community. He holds that education will not altogether ameliorate their economic and social status, except helping them to read and write their own letters. Their destiny is their hard physical labour and is sanctioned by the scriptures. His Jetha wages war with a question:

'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'.(Biswas, 4)

But his grandfather has an intuitive vision of the changing faces of the future. He realizes that education is the ladder to social dignity and respect. He has experienced the changing social outlook towards the subaltern:

'... earlier people used to abuse me as charal- chandal so often. But now no one calls you charal- chandal, no one calls you tui disrespectfully referring to your caste. They are showing a little respect, remember this!' (Biswas, 5)

Like his grandfather, his father also believed that education is the only hope for a new change, a better tomorrow. To him illiteracy and ignorance mean subordination and surrender to the caste hegemony monopolized by the upper caste Hindu. His father immensely supported his zeal for education for he realized that it is only through education one can achieve self- respect and dignity in society. Biswas narrates:

Baba believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives- there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation. (Biswas, 4)

But poverty is the main hurdle in his dream of education. When it becomes quite difficult for a poor family to earn two time's meals, it is really impossible to see them

spending money on education. Born in a poor untouchable family Biswas has to maintain a balance between his perpetual slavery as a child labourer and his zeal for education.

Biswas is highly critical about their social stigma based on their food habits. He painfully recounts how the folks from upper caste used to taunt them as 'pork- eating namas'. It is true, though unpleasant that Biswas's family used to eat pork, which at times takes the form of a festival. This pork selling and pork eating are considered to be the affairs of the low caste people. This food habit aggravates their social segregation as subaltern and marginalized beings. The narrator strives to find an answer to how can one community's food habits determine their social status? This new appellation 'pork- eating namas' outrage fiery passion in him and his community to question the hegemony of caste and class:

When addressed as 'Pork- eating namas', they would get mad with anger. Those who ate pork and even those who did not got equally enraged! They would be convinced immediately that they were being abused. Even a round of fisticuffs to avenge the abuse was not surprising! (Biswas, 9)

It is no shame for Biswas to celebrate their community's favourite pork- eating festival. Instead, he is full of sarcasm against the taboos and stigma that borne out of this food habit. In a mood of celebration, he beautifully delineates the episode of pork- eating and the smiling, joyful faces of every household of his community. Through the pictorial presentation of pork- eating ceremony and the hunting of 'babui' or 'baloi' as their favourite delicacies, Biswas wants to celebrate his Dalithood against the monopoly of '*bhadralok*' culture.

The namashudra community of Bengal is the most deprived, discarded, marginalized beings in terms of social relationships and positions, economic status, cultural practice and educational opportunities. They call themselves Hindus, but they feel alienated from the mainstream upper caste Hindu society. Vaishnavism which was in the full swing during Biswas's times fails to attract the attention of his family and his community. In this connection Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's observation is worth quoting here:

Chaitanya never hesitated to visit the houses of the Sudras and Chandalas, and he believed that what qualified a man to become a guru was not whether he was a Brahman or a Sudra, but whether he had attained the knowledge of Krishna. But apart from that, Chaitanaya never attempted a frontal attack on the varnashram dharma (Bandyopadhyay, 81)

Quite sarcastically Biswas describes the cultural contrast between the strict laws of the casteist Hindus and the tradition of his illiterate community:

The widows of my community were accustomed to eating fish and meat. This practice remains among them even today. It is not their habit to observe ekadashi or other such rituals. The strict restriction of widow remarriage was not prevalent among them. Their own social reformers had started the practice of widow remarriage a long time ago. (Biswas, 51)

In Bengali society, casteist ideologies and discrimination aggravate the marginalization of shudras. The upper caste Hindu society considers them as untouchable 'Other'. The age-old tradition of the caste-ridden society employs a complex mechanism of oppression in the name of purity-pollution binaries. Biswas painfully narrates their social segregation due to their caste stigma. He recounts how the upper caste babus avoid the company of low caste people of his community. They would neither enter their neighbourhood nor would they sit to eat with them. Biswas presents the cruel face of untouchability while narrating the visit of any priest into their neighbourhood for performing any ritual. The upper caste Brahmin would not eat any food prepared by the low caste woman. Not only this, but also, the woman of the household has to smear the veranda with cow dung to get it purged of their 'lowliness'. This caste consciousness and discrimination not only marginalized the shudras but also the priests who perform rituals for the subaltern Dalits. Such priests are thought to be with low brahminism without any access to mainstream caste and society. In the backdrop of a caste based '*bhadralok*' society, his community is very much like 'chuno, puti, koi, magur', living constantly under the threat of aristocratic fish like 'rui, katla'. They feel happy and blessed only to be alive in this chaotic world of 'matsanaya' – a world of aristocratic class and community. This separate and aristocratic world of the fish painfully reminds him of their community's sufferings and oppression under the cruel impact of power and caste stigma.

Women all over the patriarchy and social structure have the same status. Biswas painfully portrays how women are always marginalized and subordinated without 'voice' and identity. The depiction of Muron's wife in the autobiography unveils the sordid reality about women's role in society. She was married to an eccentric person Muron. The verdict of the village Morol about the ghost upon Muron and its subsequent solution in marriage takes a heavy toll upon Muron's wife. In fact, Muron needs medical treatment not the wife. The agonies and pangs of Muron's wife are never heard and realized. She is completely alien to the passion of love, affection and filial bonding and this lack lead her to choose the most devastating step. Her death never touches the stoney conscience of the people of the upper caste mainstream society. They never try to realize why she committed suicide? Instead, they are engrossed in assessing and evaluating how her death brings evil and ignominy to the family. Her life is a total mess, a tragic waste. Life as well as death brings absolute sorrow to her existence. Her mental agony finds an emphatic expression in Biswas's narrative when she confides:

'I have not experienced what a husband is. What will I do staying back here? If I return to my father's place, no one will feed me. I will get more peace in death than in living'. (Biswas, 47)

The Partition of Indian subcontinent on religious grounds in 1947 brings untold miseries and sufferings to both sides of the border. It results in a massive population transfer. It becomes really difficult for the low caste poor Dalit community to migrate, leaving their own houses, land behind. Those Hindu Dalits who stayed back in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) would be known as minorities in the Muslim majority country and those who

crossed the border due to the fear of communal intolerance would earn their new appellation as Dalit refugees without any identity, land and habitation. It is a pity and an agonizing account of how such low caste Dalit Namashudra people have become refugees in their own homeland. Biswas relates how the upper caste Hindu refugees cross the border without any problem and atrocities by the 'state machinery'. But any effort on the part of poor Dalit refugees would result in unspeakable atrocities. Rebellious in spirit, Biswas seeks to dismantle this prejudiced attitude of the 'state machinery'. His rebellious mind tries to wage war with questions: Why such discrimination exists in society? Why they have to pocket such inhuman atrocities in the name of rehabilitation?

Why they have to carry the burden of imposed identity in their own motherland? The answer to such questions lies hidden in the hegemonic power of caste and tradition in society which Biswas terms as 'aristocratic caste- pearls'. Manoranjan Byapari in his article *Is there any Dalit Writing in Bengal?* raises his voice of resistance against such prejudice towards the treatment of Dalit refugees in Bengal:

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)

The geographical boundary unleashed mammoth human misery and sufferings upon the uprooted Dalit refugees of Bengal. They are now doubly marginalized by the hegemony of caste and their imposed identity resulting in rootlessness and alienation from the self and the land. Such a marginalized and burdened existence of Dalit refugees finds an expression in his poem *A Separated Courtyard Room*:

Like a fly caught in a cobweb
Stronger and stronger the iron rods. (Poetic Rendering As yet UNBORN: 41)

Biswas seeks to share his agonizing experience as a Dalit refugee- a torn self-caught between the cobwebs of Partition. Biswas narrates that with the news of communal violence erupted in the Western part of the country, they decided not to leave their homeland. But, how long the sparks of religious fanaticism remain extinguished in the embers of communal violence. Biswas along with his family and relatives came to West Bengal only to get disillusioned to discover themselves now as a foreigner in their own homeland. He suffers from an identity crisis and painfully compared him with a vagabond 'oscillating like a pendulum'- a vagabond of nowhere without selfhood and identity Biswas's own journey like a vagabond from one place to another painfully reflects his community's sense of rootlessness and marginalization due to the burden of imposed identity as refugees. In an interview with Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, Angana Dutta and Mohini Gurav that is appended in this autobiography, Biswas poignantly recounts his experience of pain as a Dalit refugee in Partitioned West Bengal:

No food to eat, no shelter to sleep in, no kith or kin to look after me. A vagabond and a hundred percent vagabond refugee in India (Biswas, 93)

Biswas's life narrative *Surviving in My World* records his deep sense of regard for his community. Their social traditions and practices are deeply rooted in him. Through his journey from childhood to maturity Biswas has experienced the cruel face of poverty, hunger, starvation, caste oppression and social exclusion. This social ostracism does not alienate him from its cultural roots, but is found to celebrate their rituals and cultural heritage. Biswas painfully presents the enigmatic account of their marginalization in the mainstream society of 'bhadrak' culture. They are derided into the margin for their low caste untouchability. But in spite of this existential crisis, his community never feels as unwanted beings of this world. Their lives of constant rejection teach them the lesson of endurance in the midst of scarcities and social deprivation. Biswas narrates that the low caste nama community has produced many artists and literary creations. They have created their own world of art and artifacts where ignorance, illiteracy, poverty never sour their bliss of fulfillment. He proudly asserts that the people of his community are not cowards, but valiant, intelligent and talented. While narrating the talent of his community he found a strong resemblance in Velutha, a Dalit protagonist in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Biswas opines that talent is an inborn faculty which never prioritizes any caste hegemony or privileges. As a writer with artistic sensibilities, it really pains him to see his community's struggle for survival and identity which strengthens his commitment to social upliftment of the downtrodden. The artistic sensibility in him, wages a war against all kind injustices and social slavery. The so long 'voiceless' people of his community now start clamouring their voice for education, emancipation from slavery and security of food. They want to break the chain of bondage and drudgery that perpetually draw a line between 'bhadrak' and 'chotok' in the name of caste, religion and scripture:

'The Hindus of the Bhairab banks and we who dwell on the banks of the Kali, we too are Hindus- the same Hindus. Then why do we want to live by feeding on others' leftovers, depending on the grace of others? Why are we not thinking of becoming equals?' (Biswas, 83)

He is proud of his community and his pride gives birth to immense hatred and prejudice against the hegemony of caste. From this perspective, it would not be wrong to attribute Biswas's stance with the counter rejection theory of Gopal Guru:

The subalterns are rejecting the old ideology of equating their bodies to dirt or animal, arguing that every organic body- human or animal- consists of organic refuse... Bodies in general are undifferentiated because they contain underneath their skin all kinds of refuse or filth. Such bodies containing filth are not treated as repulsive as long as the filth remains hidden within them. (Guru, 222)

Deconstructing Spivak's theory of subalternity, Biswas raises his voice as a subaltern Dalit against the oppressive system of 'bhadralok' mainstream culture and society. His voice, his identity and pride as a subaltern is the voice and pride of his community. Biswas's narrative shows that the subaltern can speak, can wage war with pen and paper against all odds and oppressions. And he does so not through negation, but through the celebration and assertion of his Dalithood. It reflects how as a subaltern he has been appropriated to the 'bhadralok' mainstream culture and society due to his 'sanskritization' and 'acculturation'. His voice is the voice of emancipation and liberation of his community from bondage. As a marginalized subaltern he would no longer want to live like an insignificant water hyacinth but earnestly looks forward to secure a place for himself and for his community in the caste ridden Bengali society.

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