

The Dynamics of Social Seclusion in the Select Short Stories of Manju Bala

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Abstract

The paper intends to study Manju Bala's short stories such as *Conflict*, *The Housemaid Special*, *Discrimination* in the light of dalitism. Bala being a Bengali Dalit woman writer portrays the grim condition of the marginalized women in Bengal with her empirical study. In all three stories, we happen to witness caste-based discrimination, gender biasness, social injustice, domestic violence and so on. The female protagonists may be seen as transgressing the conventionality but society in large biased towards gender roles. Women are seen only as objects, peace providers, calm and quiet so on. They as we see are not provided with any emancipatory spirit even by their kith and kin but they have tried to go beyond with such obstacles. And throughout their journey, the characters face multiple dilemmas, troubles and conflicting emotion. The discriminatory practice is not something external or physical but cognitive. This mental dilemma is quite noticeable. We attempt to observe how economic stability fails to secure self-esteem and social prestige not only due to caste discrimination but also gender expectation. Patriarchy always runs high in controlling the minds that of the uncontrolled. Patriarchy, somehow, interpellates that women need not to be educated and provided with what the males in particular are provided. From early childhood till maturity, we see how the characters are marginalized and bullied by others. The term Dalit comes in contact in this paper to suggest any kind of exploitation faced by anybody. Thus, this paper tends to highlight all such issues which are silently nurtured by society.

Keywords- Dalit feminism, Domestic Violence, Gender, Social Injustice

Introduction

The term *dalit* etymologically is of Sanskrit origin owes its origin from the word dal which means downtrodden or destroyed. The latter denotation of the term implies more inclusivity by declaring that Dalits are those "who are members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and the poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (Joshi,145). It refers to any individual or a group of people who are marginalized and refused to by any hegemonic and so-called superior power. The marginalized people are given a derogative

term untouchable to enhance class superiority, social power and pollution politics. This brings other factors like biasness towards a particular gender, caste and so on.

Women are the most victimized figures in this case. This kind of double marginalization does not only affect the mental health of these women but also their social prestige and self-dignity. They are silenced in terms of gender, skin colour, caste rhetoric etc. We will follow Manju Bala's short stories for our elaboration on the above issues and which are imperatives to pinpoint the based arguments.

Banani in *Conflict*, Ketaki in *The Housemaid Special* and Fuliya in *Discrimination* are the three major female protagonists who are seen as immolations to domestic violence, gender discrimination and caste-based prejudices. To understand the oppression and torture against these women we can look at the conference NGO Declaration on Gender and Racism which NFDW adopted in the World Conference Against Racism where it is stated thus: "We recognize that the relationship between gender and distinct forms of racism, therefore in the Asian and particularly Indian context, typifies the particularity of the condition of women belonging to the Dalit..." (Rao, 365)

The outcome is reflected with the assertion of Dalit feminism which revolts against mainstream feminism. Dalit writers emphasize that feminism is also structured like patriarchy and hegemonic power which does not allow the marginalized women any space and to break social prejudices and cultural hegemony. All the mainstream systems work as a hindrance to the liberation of Dalit women. The Dalit women writers have taken such issue ahead to voice against any injustice and to speak out their minds. The characters in Bala, are prone to show us malpractices perpetrated against them. From early childhood to maturity and even by securing a social ladder Bala's protagonists face a lot of subjugation even at the hands of their family members and society in a broader context.

Discussion:

Conflict, a short story by which is about a girl Tumpa, who reads the diaries of her mother and reminiscences about the grim reality and the story behind the relationship between her father and mother. She comes to know at the end the tragic death of her mother due to a stove explosion which is slightly hinted at and given rise to a grave issue over domestic violence. It can be because Banani refuses to leave singing which was in the former case the reason for Kalyan's loving her. But later, it is Kalyan who suggests Banani not to think about singing and to even leave her studies as his mother cannot tolerate it, better to say, dislikes it. We can blink our eyes to Renuka Devi who is the mother in law of Banani and what she instructs and threatens her to do: "Stop right there, will you? You low-born girl, no singing here! It is not the tradition of the Kanjilal family to have its women break into song like that! You have to maintain a certain decorum here" (Bala, 15). This expression clearly shows how Banani has to tolerate domestic exploitation. It is not only over her singing practice but also her caste. She may belong to a marginalized caste but we can observe how

Banani is meticulous in cultural activities. But her mother in law calling her a low caste tries to subvert her potentials. Renuka Devi brings the reference of her family heritage to point out that the behavioural pattern of her family should not get reversed here. The notion of patriarchy mindset runs high in Renuka Devi's statement which works as a power structure in the family to avoid any kind of deviation. But as her son Kalyan does not bother about caste, Renuka Devi tries to get control over her son to stop her daughter in law's supposed to out of decorum practices. Kalyan influenced by his mother's hegemonic mindset says to Banani: "Do you want to continue your singing lessons, Banani? But since Mother doesn't approve of it, it's better you give up singing, you know. And you don't really need to continue with your M.A. either, do you?"

Social consciousness is crucial in bringing a transformation. This tool can be used by oppressed women to fight against any wrong done to them. But what will happen if education and consciousness do not go hand in hand? Renuka Devi stops her daughter in law from taking singing lessons and her son also participates by forging that Banani should not complete her education. Education works as an emancipatory weapon to the downtrodden and voiceless victims but this is also taken away from Banani none but by her husband. Banani seeks to fulfil her wishes through her daughter Tumpa and exclaims the overturned nature of Kalyan thus; "Kalyan is no longer the Kalyan I fell in love with! My terrorized, panic-stricken face makes him even more ruthless. I would never have known how brutal people can be if I had not come so close to the Kalyan of today. I have a little girl called Tumpa. I want to bring her up! ...can make Tumpa a doctor, an even better doctor than her father" (Bala,17). Banani's dream of making Tumpa a doctor may be fulfilled later in the text but she is not there to observe this. Tumpa tries to remember when somebody describes how her mother got burnt due to a stove explosion. The piercing wail from her side makes the truth clearer thus: "no this cannot be...this can never be...no" (Bala,17). It is very pertinent to look at what Nilima Dutta opines about domestic violence in Economic and Political Weekly:

Domestic violence is essentially violence penetrated by persons in intimate family relationship...sociological studies indicate that the acts are a means of controlling the victim's thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Domestic violence does subside in individual relationships unless there are external interventions which protect both the woman and simultaneously encourage behaviour modification in the perpetrator. (Dutta, 4)

So, it is for dominating and subverting Banani's own choice, her mother-in-law tries her utmost effort to take her in the conventionality. This includes outside violence which brings disordered social inequality in Banani. Tumpa recollects the memories through flashback and looks back in anger at the injustice and dehumanization perpetrated against her mother. So, it is an immeasurable conflict within Tumpa that transforms her mental order to search for a

stable society and better coming days. She at last confirms that she has been successful in bringing a change in the family stratum.

Another short story of Manju Bala which is titled *The Housemaid Special* also asks us to take into account the pain and anxiety that one has to undergo if he or she belongs to any marginalized section. The text portrays the life of a housemaid Ketaki and her son Pocha realistically. Ketaki faces a lot of discrimination due to her caste, gender and profession as a housemaid. Pocha is also ridiculed by her classmates in his school and mostly by two Pallav and Biplab for the reservation system in government exams and jobs. Though Pocha speaks against this system being a reserved category student, his schoolmates always mock him. Even when Pocha becomes economically independent, the social ladder restricts him to have a decent life with self-esteem. Lastly, Ketaki decides to go above these issues or transcend herself by exclaiming perplexingly which makes us remind that she wants to get rid of all the discriminatory practices. We can notice that prejudiced statement made by Ketaki's Boudimoni in whose house Ketaki works as housemaid: "You always have some ailment or the other. Today, it's you, tomorrow it's your son, day after it's somebody else's. Only telling lies. It happens, among these lower castes. I have hired another hand. You may go now" (Bala, 20). Ketaki loses her job with her self-dignity broken and not only that questions her existential crisis but also ontological. She is labelled as low caste by her Boudimoni which is intolerable to digest for Ketaki. Even in school Pocha is bullied by Pallav thus: "...they pass the joint entrance through reservation and become quacks and killer-doctors" (Bala,20). And Pocha replies this time by saying "why? Does the examination happen through reservation as well? One has to pass just like others" (22). Pocha does have a humanitarian perspective and he becomes conscious of the emancipatory power of education when one of his friends remarks: "Education is not for us, Pocha. It is made for the bhadrlok". And Pocha makes his friend Haran understand thus: "See Haran, if this is how we stop going to school and stay away from studies, then that would only favour their cause. They only want that". Finding Pocha's words logical he says that Pocha has opened his eyes. Pocha is heavily conscious of the fact that if he achieves financial success by using education as a weapon, he may be able to climb up the social ladder and thus he will be equal to others. But this is not the case with Pocha, he faces a darker reality when he gets a job as a school teacher. There he experiences a lot of discriminatory practices like "he was not allowed to sit in the teacher's room from the very first day, the class IV staff is delegated to take his classes and his drinking water is also set separate from other teachers" because Pocha is the only SC teacher in the school

We have come across how caste-based politics runs high in the educational sector also. It is presumed that the upper caste teachers may get polluted if they work together with Pocha. Uma Chakravarti explains elaborately the relationship between caste and gender in this way:

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Caste is a system of graded inequality in which scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. That is as you go up the caste system, the power and the status of caste group increases and as you go down the scale of degree for the caste increases, as there, castes have no power, are of low status, and are regarded as dirty and polluting. (Chakravarti, Uma.2005).

The inequality lies within and the graded scale of social phenomena looms large to promote such practices. The pollution-politics is given a hand to not just bring social division but also the division of thought process. Such things are very much observable if we look at these with and from a humanitarian focal.

Discrimination is also noteworthy to get mentioned here. Manju Bala depicts the life of Fuliya Sardar who experiences exploitation, subjugation and discrimination from her school days, which is continuing still even after her marriage with Jeet. Bijaya, Jeet's sister does have sympathy and love for Fuliya. She insists on her brother Jeet for looking at the injustices done to Fuliya by her mother in law. It is a poignant story that demonstrates caste-based marginalization and pollution-politics. Domestic dehumanization is at the core of this story. Fuliya may work as a college teacher but she is denied to get access to social respect only because of her caste and it is done even by her family members. Economic and educational emancipation does not succeed to provide Fuliya with a stable society where she can have social justice and self-dignity. In this way, a Dalit feminist standpoint should take its turn as Sharmila Rege points out that it "places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group" (Rege, 1998:45).

Conclusion:

To sum up, the paper wholeheartedly focuses on the issues of inequality perpetuated by society in all sectors which are brilliantly penned down by Manju Bala in her short stories. We have seen how much the characters tend to face intolerable social seclusion and to make an escape from these injustices Bala's characters such as Tumpa in Conflict, Pocha in The Housemaid Special and Fuliya Sardar in Discrimination have attempted to take such steps which meticulously elaborated by Anand Teltumbde thus; "Education occupies a unique place in the emancipation schema of Dalits. Until a couple of centuries ago, education was forbidden to them in the state of bondage and humiliation. Education was the basic catalyst to germinate consciousness of their being and impel them to agitate against their oppression" (Teltumbde.2014:8).

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