



**DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES: LEVELS OF MARGINALIZATION AND
RESISTANCE IN SELECT SHORT STORIES OF JATIN BALA FROM
THE ANTHOLOGY CALLED *STORIES OF SOCIAL AWAKENING:
REFLECTIONS OF DALIT REFUGEE LIVES OF BENGAL***

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ABSTRACT

*The term diaspora refer to the group of people who do not reside in their country of origin. In today's world where identities are increasingly defined with reference to dominant powers; marginalization becomes central with regards to diasporic communities. Though marginalization can be due to various factors such as class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., the primary focus of this article will be the experience of marginalization because of the diasporic status of the authors and characters, and further marginalization they encounter within the diasporic communities due to their class and caste. Therefore one can see that there are levels of marginalization with regards to diasporic communities, and the marginalization is both within and without. This article aims to explicate it and further explore how in the hegemonic paradigm, varied means of resistance are undertaken by some of the oppressed marginalized communities, to rebel against the dominant powers. The select short stories, "Story of Social Consciousness", "The Man Called Ratan" and "Reminiscences of Life at a Refugee Camp" from the anthology called *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal* by Jatin Bala, illustrate experiences of the diasporic community of Namasudra refugees from Bangladesh. The characters in the stories are doubly marginalized along the lines of caste or class and refugee status, although they shared the language and religion of the host land. The contradictory ideas of marginalization and empowerment coincide in the idea of resistance. Though they are not successful in changing the social scenario, but the narratives do not end on a bleak note. The Namasudra refugees continue to resist as a community.*

Introduction

The term diasporas, which comes from the Greek word for scattering or dispersal, primarily refers to a group of people who no longer reside in their country of origin or homeland. The earliest usage of the word can be traced back in the Bible, where it is used to refer to the Diaspora of Jews who were exiled by the Babylonians from Israel. But now, the concept of diasporas is used more widely to describe any large migration of people. Politics, natural disaster, globalization and transnational's are some of the possible reasons of the wide dispersal of these communities from their homeland. Diasporic communities are often bound together by a common ethno-linguistic and/or religious identity. Collective memory of the homeland and the events that led to their exile are some of the shared experiences of the diasporic communities.

Diasporic community as a concept has been theorized lately in the 21st Century. Many critical theorists like William Safran, Nicholas Van Hear, Steven Vertovec, Robin Cohen, Jasbir Jain, M.L.Raina, George Steiner and Bed P. Giri have opined their theories on diasporas and have attempted to bring out the meaning of the word diasporas. Many of them



are of the opinion that the term diaspora is complex to be defined accurately. The socio-cultural context becomes important in defining the term diaspora. Alienation, trauma of displacement, longing for the homeland, nostalgia, quest for identity and rootless ness become some of the major themes of diasporic literature along with issues regarding assimilation and disintegration of cultures. South Asian Diasporic writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, BapsiSidhwa, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and JhumpaLahiri have explored their diasporic consciousness in their works. One classic example of South Asian diasporic community that can be identified through literature are those of the Parsis. Zoroastrians are broadly divided into two communities, the Iranis and the Parsis. While the Iranis rebelled against the Muslims during the Muslim Conquest of Persia, the Parsis fled from Iran. BapsiSidhwa and Rohinton Mistry writes about the Parsis living in a multicultural society yet struggling to find their identity in the midst of hegemonic identities.

Marginalization is a social process of pushing a particular group or a person to the periphery of the society by denying them of agency. The marginalized are excluded from various rights, opportunities and resources. Marginalization can be based on factors such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, gender, skin color or religion. Sometimes it can also be a double-oppression, where a person or a group is marginalized on the basis of more than one factor. In a world where identities are increasingly defined with reference to dominant powers, marginalization becomes central with regards to diasporic communities. Marginalization is not only limited to the power dichotomy between the communities of host land and diasporic communities, but often the sense of collective identity is replaced by animosity within the community. Literature, often defined as reflection of life aims to provide an agency to the marginalized. There are instances in literature where we have seen that counter discourses not only challenge the dominant discourse but often becomes narratives of resistance. Selwyn Cudjoe in his work *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* and Barbara Harlow in her book *Resistance Literature* states that resistance is an act or set of acts designed to get rid of oppression. In other words, resistance refers to aversion or hostility towards a hierarchical structure. Resistance literature uses the language of the dominant to challenge and subvert the hegemonic discourses. The marginalized retaliates against the oppression imposed by the dominant. The two contradictory ideas of marginalization and empowerment coincide in the idea of resistance. Resistance can either by through assimilation and subsequently empowering themselves or it can be through complete negation to the extent of retaliatory violence. Resistance can also be through literature. In Indian context, the literature of the marginalized can be best explored through Dalit Literature. Bama, a Tamil Dalit Christian Feminist, writes about her experiences of marginalization in her autobiography *Karukku*(1992). Dalit women face three-fold marginalization on the basis of caste, class and gender. In *The God of Small Things*(1996), Arundhati Roy explores the atrocities in the caste-ridden Indian society and the status of women in this hostile social scenario. In the context of African-American women, representative writers such as Toni Morrison have contributed to the American literary arena by capturing the lives and sufferings of the Black women in her fictional works like *The Beloved trilogy*, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) etc. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) narrates the story of a woman who is constantly raped by



her step father and unable to narrate her shameful experience to anyone therefore write letters addressed to God.

Most of times when partition of India is studied, people often recognize the refugees from Pakistan as “true refugees” and refugees from then East Bengal as migrants. History tends to forget the trauma and dreadful conditions of refugees from the East. Indian independence that led to partition of India, riots of Noakhali and Barisal in 1950, and subsequent communal riots in the then East Pakistan and finally the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 were the major reasons behind the influx of Hindus from Bangladesh. They escaped systematic mass killings, rapes, arson and looting. The refugees were disillusioned after coming to India; they did not get their promised homeland. They were kept in vicious conditions in the Refugee Camps. The Namasudras were the worst victims of the mass exodus. Though they shared the language and religion of the host land communities, but their caste and class became the reason for which they were oppressed and marginalized. Namasudras are one of the largest (scheduled) castes of the province of Bengal, the leaders of this laboring and agricultural community sought to effectively challenge the caste Hindu domination of public life through their negotiations with the colonial state over the course of the late 19th and 20th centuries. JatinBala's select short stories from the anthology called *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal* provide a vivid portrayal of the shared histories of violence and trauma of Namasudra families who had emigrated from Bangladesh as a consequence of partition and subsequent riots. The stories showcase their myriad experiences of double marginalization due to their caste and refugee status and how they resisted against the dominance and inequality.

Jatin Bala was born in 1949 at Parhiyali, Manirampur in Jessore, Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan). He was orphaned at the tender age of four and like a roving wanderer he spent his childhood in extreme poverty and suffering. He worked in a paddy field as a daily laborer. He migrated to India during communal riots of Bangladesh and took shelter in Kunti refugee camp in Hooghly. Later he moved to Bongaon and then to Kolkata, pursued M.A in Bengali Literature from Calcutta University and became a revolutionary refugee Bengali Dalit writer (“JatinBala's journey from a laborer to an award-winning Dalit writer”, Halder, *Merinews*). His works are like a cathartic experience for him as writing for him is an outlet of his emotions, sufferings, humiliations and oppressions as a marginalized.

The refugees from Bangladesh escaped genocide, rapes, arson and looting during Partition and subsequent riots, and migrated to India. The Namasudras are considered as the worst victims of this involuntary exodus. Shekhar Bandopadhyay opines that the Namasudra identity underwent a transfiguration after the Independence (Bandopadhyay, *Asian Studies Review* 460-464). The experience of displacement added another factor to their marginalization. Though the refugees shared the language and religion of the host land communities, but their caste and class became the reason for which they were oppressed and marginalized. Jatin Bala looks at the issues of his community at large in his anthology of short stories entitled *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal*. The anthology provides a narrative of trauma, suffering, rejection and resistance of the refugee Namasudras. The centuries old paradigm in which the Dalit remains socially



dispossessed is challenged through his narratives as the refugee Namasudras in his stories resist the hegemony of the upper castes, as a community. The select short stories can be seen as personal accounts by the Dalit refugees where the narrator or the protagonist moves back and forth between the individual "I" and the collective "we".

The refugees from Bangladesh were systematically marginalized in the Refugee Camps which is explored by Jatin Bala in the short story "Reminiscences of Life at Refugee Camps". The short story shows the dreadful condition of the destitute refugees from Bangladesh who had migrated to India during the riots in erstwhile East Bengal in the wake of Partition. The narrator and his family first lived in the Kunti Transit Camp, where they were provided with tents and meager cash dole of six rupees a month. They lived in utmost poverty. The refugee camp was on an arid land, there were no trees or vegetation. They had to travel miles to reach the market to buy daily food products and fuel to satisfy their hunger, since literally and geographically the refugee camps were located in the periphery of mainstream society. "Plagued by burning hunger and thirst, tortured by thoughts of an uncertain future, hemmed in by the oppressive heat, the refugees continued their ceaseless fight for survival." (157).

The capitalistic ideology of the government officials marginalized the refugees by prohibiting the heads of refugee families to go out of the camp and eke out any form of living. This also restricted them from economic advancement; hence they had no opportunity to climb the social ladder. The narrator and his family during their stay at Bhandarhati Work Side had to contribute manually towards the construction of the irrigation canal that was being built in the surrounding area of the camp. After the completion of the irrigation canal, the authorities decided to dismantle the camp and the refugees would be relocated. Though they tried to resist through protests and demanded for proper rehabilitation, in return they were mercilessly beaten up and forcibly herded into trucks and ferried them to refugee camps across the state which shows the physical violence inflicted on them. The physical sufferings speak the language of oppression where their bodies become the site of their exploitation. Sufferings of the rootless refugees were not only physical; but also their psyche was fractured and further distorted by the horrific living conditions of the refugee camps. Hunger made them inhumane. Murders and rapes became recurrent crimes without any punishment and measures to stop these crimes. The Indian Government refused to look upon the refugees from Bangladesh as "true refugees" who need rehabilitation. The government decided the unwanted refugees to be transported to bleak Dandakaranya. It had no pity for the plight of the helpless, rootless refugees. The narrator had spent about ten years at Refugee Camps and was orphaned at the tender age of four. His determination to continue his education at any cost was constant in him. Even when the conditions changed, the narrator could never erase the deplorable memories of the refugee camps.

The nationalist discourse often tends to disregard the marginalization of the diasporic communities. Diasporic literary narratives often narrates their experiences of alienation, trauma of dislocation and the conflict between the host land and diasporic communities. They provide an alternative narrative or counter discourse to mainstream nationalist discourse. The



narrator of "Reminiscences of Life at Refugee Camps" also unfolds the unsympathetic attitude of the Government. "The rootless, displaced refugees from East Pakistan were subjected to constant harsh, callous and insensitive treatment by both the Government of India and by the Government of West Bengal." (162). There was rarely an opportunity to come out of this dreadful situation, but the narrative informs that the narrator was receiving education which can be seen as a possibility for the refugees to resist. Education paves the way for empowerment and economic advancement. Hence, it provides the opportunity to come out of the dreadful refugee camps and improve their condition of living.

The magnitude of marginalization of the refugees escalated if they came from the lower castes. The plight of the Namasudra community is represented through Ratan, the protagonist of the story "The Man Called Ratan". Ratan was a carpenter by profession; he was not only a Namasudra but also a Kathbanga (Bengalis originally from Bangladesh), therefore doubly marginalized. Ratan was a traumatized figure who was still coping with the displacement from his roots. Though he was short in height, but "his head seems to touch the sky in sheer pride of his humanity. Uprooted in the partition brought about by an unholy nexus the man is ever trying heart and soul to find the ground beneath his feet for survival." (50-51). Songs lightened his mood; hence he was often found humming tunes while working. Ratan often pondered about his homeland, its people and how the riots changed his life and how he had to struggle to survive.

In his workspace, the co-workers kept on conspiring against Ratan especially Gopal Chatterjee, the Brahmin head contractor. Ratan worked in a team where he was the only low caste Bengal (Bengalis originally from Bangladesh) along with all Ghotis (Bengalis originally from West Bengal). He was systematically excluded from people of his community. Initially, Ratan endured all the hostilities, harassments, insults, chidings and taunts. His trauma was the reason behind his passivity. But later he started replying back politely. Gopal Chatterjee left no stone unturned to prove Ratan inefficient, but in the process he invited his own fall. Ratan saved him even though all his co-workers prohibited him from doing so. The same Gopal Chatterjee who used to abhor Ratan and tormented him always, now called him a brother.

In India, caste and class often collapse. Ratan Dhali, the Namasudra, can also be seen as a representative of the working class or proletariat and Gopal Chatterjee, the Brahmin, as the bourgeois capitalist. Karl Marx, in his magnum opus written in collaboration with Friedrich Engels *The Communist Manifesto*, sees class struggle as the driving force of all historical developments. He argued that the bourgeois capitalist mercilessly exploited and oppressed the proletariat which holds true in the case of Ratan, the proletariat and Gopal, the bourgeois. Also, Gopal Chatterjee tries to give money to Ratan for saving his life, which again solidifies the Marxists theory which claims that the capitalists commodity everything, even human life. This short story ends with the hope that humanity can erase all manmade divisions. Here, the resistance is through the extension of humanitarian values. It also shows how important it is to resist oppression in order to survive. Passivity gives the powerful the



agency to oppress more, therefore it is important to fight back and protest against the oppression.

The short story "Story of Social Consciousness" by Jatin Bala delineates the inspiring life of Jahar Sarkar who is an activist and a true leader of the poor Dalit farmers. Jahar Sarkar in his conversation with the narrator asserted that the greatest enemy of India is religion and caste, and as long as we hold on to it, nothing good can happen. He further talks about his village which was all forest and wasteland where tigers lived hiding behind the bushes. The people of the region thought that the refugees were more dangerous than the tigers. As a community, the Namasudras hailing from the Orakandi region of Faridpur (in Bangladesh) built a village in the jungle and marshland. Clearing the forest, they turned the wasteland into a village. But due to attacks from the members of powerful high castes, they had to desert their houses built anew. This did not stop them from building their houses again; hence resisting the oppressive structure. The refugees thus molded a diasporic community which was bound together by their shared experience of marginalization, due to their caste.

Dalit narratives are often seen as a literature of the marginalized. The pain of one person renders the anguish of thousands of people, experienced over thousands of years. Its character is collective rather than individual. Jahar Sarkar shared his experience of saving a girl from sinking in the pond, but instead of gratitude he received only contempt; as conventionally the touch of the Dalit makes one impure. Jahar Sarkar kindled the narrator's social consciousness; he had shown him the light to guide the nation. But five years later, when he again encountered Jahar Sarkar, he was no more the same person. The narrator was devastated to see his condition. Someone from the crowd yelled that he had lost his sanity the night when throats of twenty Dalits were slit by some members of the orthodox Brahmin community. Their slaughter records the collective oppression and violence acquitted on the Dalits. Dalit bodies are brutalized because of the hegemony of the caste structure. This short story raises certain questions in minds of the readers regarding the oppression of the marginalized. The revolutionary character, Jahar Sarkar, compelled the narrator to contemplate on the discrimination of the Namasudra refugees from Bangladesh. But the tragic ending of the short story shows that despite the struggle and resistance, Jahar Sarkar is robbed of his sanity. No matter how he tried to resist the oppression, his resisting voice is silenced systematically; but his ideology of resistance continues as the narrator, who can be seen as the authorial voice, aims to continue the battle of Jahar Sarkar.

Conclusion

In case of diasporic communities, the immigrants naturally become the "other" who has come to usurp the rights and resources of the original inhabitants. In case of refugees, the migration is mostly involuntary; they are usually seen with animosity. Dalit narratives are often seen as ethnographic writings recording the downtrodden experiences of the community, they are also seen as resistance narratives that counter the hegemonic cultural formations in the society. The marginalization of these two spaces amalgamates in the select short stories of this anthology by Jatin Bala. These short stories expose the double jeopardy of the Namasudra refugees and shows how they emerge from the periphery resist their



oppression as a community. Jatin Bala, through these narratives creates awareness among the readers. The select short stories therefore become powerful resistance narratives of a doubly marginalized diasporic community.

Jatin Bala is a Dalit refugee whose works are therefore an authentic representation of the diasporic community he belongs to. Since he belongs to the first generation diaspora, his attachment with his homeland is stronger than the host land. Though he is critical of the host lands which marginalize his community, he is not so critical of the riots, genocide, ethnic cleansing that led to their migration, in his works. In his interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, the editor of the anthology, he recounts that the stories in his anthology *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal* are born out of his own downtrodden experiences as a refugee and the anecdotes of shared experience gathered from Dalit refugees (167-179). So there are elements of documentary realism in the short stories. The stories can be seen as conscience call for the readers. He aims to overthrow the established feudal Brahminic value system and create in its place a casteless society. His works can be therefore seen as ethnographic narratives, giving voice to the marginalized, hence resisting their marginalization.

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