



Dalit Testimonio: Re-exploring Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal*

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Abstract: This paper tries to re-explore the Dalit autobiography of Manohar Mouli Biswas in the light of 'testimonio'. The autobiography of Biswas, entitled *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal (2015)*, has similarities with the Latin American literary genre of testimonio. Manohar Mouli Biswas who is a powerful voice in Bangla Dalit literature, needs proper attention and extensive research should be done to assess his contribution in the field of Bangla Dalit literature. Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful tool in the hands of the Dalit writers. They write because they want to critique the existing social oppression and injustices done towards them and thereby challenge caste class hegemony. Their agency to write becomes potential tool to give voice to the hitherto voiceless.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, testimonio, trauma, untouchable, Dalit agency

1. Introduction:

Manohar Mouli Biswas is a stalwart in the Dalit literary domain and his contribution to the Dalit literature, particularly in Bangla Dalit literature is of immeasurable value. His autobiography which is mainly written in Bangla titled *Aamar Bhuvone Ami Benche Thaki (2013)*, translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi as *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal (2015)* is a significant contribution in the field of Bangla Dalit literature. This paper attempts to re-explore the autobiography of Manohar Mouli Biswas from the angle of 'testimonio'.

1.1. Autobiography as Testimonio:

Testimonio is a dominant literary genre in Latin American literature and it has been well defined by John Beverley in the second chapter which was first published in *boundary 2* 18, no.2 (summer1991) of his book *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth (2004)*:

“By testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience” (Beverley 30-31).

Beverley further points out that the Spanish word *testimonio* literally translated as “testimony”, as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense (Beverley 32). Unlike, the mainstream writing, *testimonio* is a literary genre that exists at the margins of literature. It represents especially those subjects that have been excluded in the mainstream writings. It presents the voice of the one who witnesses for the sake of others who are voiceless or who have been kept voiceless since centuries. Jacques Derrida in his 1998 essay originally in French, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg as *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* and published from Stanford University Press in 2000, equally argues that:

“In essence a testimony is always autobiographical: it tells, in the first person, the sharable and unsharable secret of what happened to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, and feel. But the classical concept of attestation, like that of autobiography, seems by law to exclude both fiction and art, as soon as the truth, all the truth and nothing but the truth, is owing: By law, a testimony must not be a work of art or a fiction.” (Derrida 43)

Although emerged from the Latin American narratives, Sharmila Rege emphasizes the term *testimonio* in the context of Dalit narratives in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006). Rege argues “in consciously violating the boundaries set by bourgeois autobiography, dalit life narratives became testimonies that summoned the truth from the past; truth about poverty and helplessness of the pre-Ambedkarite era (Rege 13). She further pointed out that the intention of *testimonio* “is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle.” (Rege 13)

1.2. Dalit Aesthetics:

Sharankumar Limbale talks about a different aesthetic for the evaluation of Dalit literature in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), he argues that Dalit literature “artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by the Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief” (Limbale 30). He further goes on to argue that because Dalit literature can be written only with a Dalit consciousness, it becomes impossible for the non-dalit writers to write Dalit literature. Manohar Mouli Biswas, who also talks about the Dalit aesthetic in his book *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic, Theory and Movements* (2017), argues that Dalit literature does not follow classical or Sanskritised literary theory, form or rhetoric. He further argues that “in studying Dalit literature, the answer is a simple one to understand: where there is a truth there is a beauty. It means that the truth itself is beautiful. The social reality in which a dalit lives, though harsh in its basic characteristics carries an aesthetic sense in itself” (Biswas 52). So, it is the Dalit consciousness, the social reality and the lived experiences that justify the authenticity of the Dalit autobiographical narratives. And it is because of the authenticity that the Dalit autobiographical writings have been treated as a *testimonio*.

1.3. Bangla Dalit Literature: An Overview:

Contrary to the popular idea that Bangla Dalit literature is a very recent phenomenon, a close scrutiny of history reveals the fact that, the Dalit consciousness emerged in Bangla since the socio-religious movement led by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur in the middle of the 19th century. The movement had given the Dalits of Bengal a deserving platform to raise their voice against centuries of exploitation and discrimination. Despite of that, the discrimination of the Dalits by Swavarna Caste continues and they have mmnse disrespect for Dalits for their lowly birth and they have cunningly constructed the myth of the origin of human being and use *dharmashastras* (Hindu religious texts) to support such discrimination to continue the practice of casteism.

Undoubtedly, the socio-religious movement brings some positive changes in favour of lower caste and inspired them to speak for their own. As a result now we have a full fledged narrative of Dalit literature – mostly autobiographies and self memoir, from the pens of the so called ‘untouchable’ who have expressed the pain, sufferings and trauma of being a Dalit. But, this is also true that Dalit literature is not just a portrayal of their pain and agony. Through their narratives, the Dalit writers have portrayed the

real picture of the denial of the basic needs to a large group of people since ages and it is through their writing that they critique and challenges such heinous practices of casteism. Therefore, their attempt is not only in favour of social negation, but it can be considered as rediscovery of their selves and portrayal of the authentic life condition with a Dalit consciousness that sincerely demands a sea change- 'revolution' as pointed out by Limbale that Dalit consciousness is the "revolutionary mentality, connected with struggle" (Limable 32).

Which is known as Dalit literature today, is a post-independence phenomenon. However, the Dalit literature in Bangla is of late origin than that of Marathi Dalit literature. Manoranjan Byapari argues in his article "Is there a Dalit writing in Bangla" that "In West Bengal, Dalit writing began nearly 20 years after Maharashtra" (Byapari 4117) and he pointed out partition trauma and tension of resettlement as one of the major causes of that. The Dalit literary board of Bengal was founded after a tragic incident. Chuni Kotal, a Dalit Adivashi of Lodha Shabar community, was discriminated because of his caste while studying at Vidyasagar University. In 1992, she had to commit suicide because of this caste discrimination. This tragic death of a student filled the Dalit writers with great emotion and ultimately resulted in the making of the Dalit movement in Bengal.

At present Bangla Dalit literature has seen the emergence of several Bangla Dalit writers who have contributed and enriched the Dalit literature in Bangla. In last few years we have seen the publication of several autobiographies by the Dalit writers of Bengal. Some of the published autobiographies by Bangla Dalit writers of importance are Dr. Manoranjan Sarkar's *Ekjon Daliter Atmakatha* (2000), Jatin Bala's *Shikor Chhera Jiban* (2010), Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012), Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Amar Bhubsney Ami Benche Thaki* (2013), Jagabandhu Biswas's *Smritir Pata Theke* (2014), Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (2016) to name a few. These autobiographies have provided a crystal clear picture of their tragic experiences in Bengal. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay aptly opines in the forward of Manohar Mouli Biswas's autobiography "This literature explodes that popular Bhadrolok myth that caste does not matter in Bengal" (Biswas xi).

2. Manohar Mouli Biswas: Life and Contribution

Manohar Mouli Biswas is a powerful voice in the realm of Bangla Dalit literature. Biswas has written both prose and poetry. During his stay in Nagpur due to his job in all India field in the Dept of Telecommunication in the 1960s, he came into contact with the Dalits and Dalit activists. His poetry shows the resistance of the Dalits. His collection of poems are *Ora Amar Kobita* (1985), *Bibikto Uthone Ghor* (1991), *Poetic Rendering as Yet Unborn* (2010), *Bikshata Kaaler Banshi* (2013), *The Wheel will Turn* (2014) and others. The collection of his short story *Krishna Mrittikar Manush* was published in 1988.

Dalit Sahiter Digboloy (1992), *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* (2007) are some of the significant pieces of writings in the field of Dalit literature. Biswas has played a major role in carrying forward the Dalit literature in Bangla. Biswas along with Shyamal Kumar Paramanik edited the book *Shatabarsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* (2011). The book covers a span of one hundred years' Dalit literature in Bangla from 1911 to 2010. His autobiography *Aamar Bhuvone Ami Benche Thaki* (2013) translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi as *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015) is another significant contribution in the field of Bangla Dalit literature. In his recently published book *An Interpretation of Dalit literature, Aesthetic, theory and Movement: through the lens of Ambedkarism* (2017), Biswas talks about the Dalit identity, movement and also opines about the aesthetics of the Dalit literature.

3. Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bangla: An Analysis

The first part of the autobiography is full of incidents from his childhood as a member of the 'namasudra' community, and in the later part of his autobiography he portrays the hardship, struggling years of his life, the fatal consequences of the partition and his life as a lower caste refugee in West Bengal, India. The complete autobiography portrays the deep agony that remained in the writer's mind since his childhood which was tough for him to forget.

The situation of the narrator in testimonio is such that must be representative of a social class or a group of people. In his autobiography *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* (2015), Manohar Mouli Biswas explains his world as the world of the Dalits who are poor, illiterate and who are kept politically powerless since centuries. Biswas writes:

“This world of mine is the dalit’s world of illiteracy, 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 being unwanted, the world of jealousy-violence-hatred-abuse, the world of the multitudes staying alive, gasping” (Biswas XIX).

Manohar Mouli Biswas begins his autobiography by calling up his inhumanly living as a Dalit in a remote village of East Bengal, his early education and the value of it. His father and grandfather both were looking forward for educating their subsequent generations, hoping it to be the only way for upgrading their livelihood. However, unlike his father and grandfather, his Jetha (uncle) had some different opinions. He used to believe that the low caste tag would never leave them. But contrary to it, his grandfather whose vision used to believe in the power of education, rightly remarks:

“I am illiterate, you are illiterate. You want to make your children illiterate too? Go ahead... But remember this, times are changing, not like what they were like. I can see so much of transformation- earlier people used to abuse me as *charal-chandal* so often. But no one calls you *charal-chandal*, no one calls you *tui* disrespectfully referring to your caste. They are showing a little respect” (Biswas 5).

Biswas reveals that his father, uncle and his grandfather were not educated. Basically they were humble peasants but they realised it well that the most important thing is education. Education is the only way to come out of the dire economic crisis of their family. His family provided him every kind of support in his quest for education. Biswas’s father also believed that education is the only way for uplifting their social position that has been imposed to them by the caste hierarchy. Biswas writes:

“Baba believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives- there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation. Even if we could not become judges, barristers, nothing could stop us from becoming at least a lawyer’s *moktar* or clerk. The children could reach some occupation of the learned and become *babus*” (Biswas 4).

Testimonio is a collective piece of writing and the autobiography of Biswas moves from the life narrative of his own to the narrative of his own community. As mentioned earlier, the narration of Biswas’s autobiography is not a linear one; it is full of accounts from his childhood. He recalls that the people of the *namasudra* community along with other Dalit communities were criticised unfairly by the higher caste people. Biswas narrates how he and his friends in their childhood, they used to go around the pig sellers. The upper caste people attached a sense of disapproval or hatred here towards the people of untouchable community. Biswas narrates how the *namasudra* community’s favourite food pork was looked down upon by the high class or higher caste people who hatefully referred to them as “pork-eating *Namas*” (Biswas 9). Manohar Mouli Biswas shows both his shock and surprise on how pork which is the favourite food of the community, used to make the high class people angry and as the people of *Namasudra* community heard their contemptuous words, even the *namasudra* people used to feel that they are really inferior. This anger somehow reflected as Biswas understands how their own people also started to believe in the social norms which were set up by the upper caste people and equally they started to feel shame because of their food habits which is pretty welcome in their own community. Biswas narrates:

“Strangely some of our people were extremely sensitive about the matter. Their sensitivity surprised me. 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” (Biswas 9).

Manoharhar Mouli Biswas narrates about his community and further points out that when Vaishnavism brought great upheavals across India, Bengal also followed it as Vaishnamism was against the caste practices in Hinduism. Biswas argues even though their whole community did not get initiated to Vaishnavism, they had their respect for Vaishnavism. However, Biswas points out that “we had rejected more of Vaishnavism than what we accepted of it” (Biswas 10). Instead, his family were more attracted towards the Matua religion. They followed the Matua-sect and they had respect towards its founder Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. Contrasted to that it, was the Matua religion that totally focused on the absolute upliftment and for the progress of their community. Their family was a staunch supporter of the matua sect. Infact Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had tried his best to erase the class barrier by popularising Vaishnavism, but the family of Manohar Mouli Biswas was attracted towards the Matua way of belief propagated by Harichand Thakur.

“I have never witnessed any enthusiasm in their making the tulsi rosary or the tilak their own practice. Rather they were more attracted to the Matua religion propagated by a great man of our community, Harichand Thakur, who came centuries after Sri Chaitanya” (Biswas 10).

It is evident that Dalit autobiographies are not all about the narratives of pain and sufferings or not all about an individual’s tragic past experiences. Biswas shared the history of the title of his autobiography which is quiet interesting. Initially the writer wanted to name it “Life and Death of a Prinsika” as he has pointed it out in his autobiography. Prinsika is the ‘water hyacinth’. Just as the water hyacinth grows naturally and is considered to be worthless; so also the lives of a Dalits are treated to be worthless. But later Biswas changed his mind and denied to be considered as a water-hyacinth which apparently has no value; but abandoned the metaphor. He claims that it happened because of a sense of glory that got developed in his identity as well as in his conscious mind. It was an achievement of becoming able to establish him from that sorrowful life to a respectful life. Their life has its own glory. Biswas has used a comparison of the fishes to rightly portray the situation. He shows that in the world of fishes, different kind of communities are found. But the aristocratic fishes do not interfere with the comparatively lower class fishes. Biswas writes:

“The Katla fish did not meddle with the school of rui fish, the rui fish did not meddle with the school of mrigel fish, the mrigel fish in turn did not meddle with the bowal fish. Every type, staying apart used to act aristocratically depending on its community” (Biswas 72).

Further Biswas is pointing it out that “The chuno, puti, koi, magur fishes would swim about in the shallow waters. They were just happy to remain alive” (Biswas 72). Biswas finds this to have a close resemblance with the people of his community who were treated as downtrodden.

The narration of witnessing is another feature of testimonio. The narrator is the witness of the sufferings, chaos, pain and trauma of a large group of people. Biswas reveals that during the upheavals of pre-independence times when many families were migrating from East Bengal to India, several poor families had to stay there because of their economic crisis. It was not possible for everyone to go to a foreign land and gets settled down there. Economic condition was a big concern. But eventually the situation compelled them to leave East Bengal, and as a refugee Biswas came to India in the early 1960s. His aim was to continue his studies and to find a job here. Biswas’s deep agony clearly reveals thus:

“As a child I saw my country become independent, I saw my country get partitioned, and saw the division on religious lines. But it was not religion, but poverty that was swinging like a sword on the top of heads.....Every person had to abandon his home during a calamity. I did the same. I took shelter in a distant relative’s house in a remote part of West Bengal. They had a small thatched room with walls of mud. Rain water seeped in through the porous roof. Husband and wife were labourers in someone else’s agricultural field. I burst into their home out of the blue. Pierced by the pain of having to draw a finishing line to my studies, I started to break down mentally” (Biswas 80).

Initially his struggle began with his education. It was tough for him to continue his education. Biswas realised that only education is the way to fight the challenges of his birth and circumstances. Luckily, he got help from one of his distant relatives and after completing his graduation, eventually he gets to secure a central government job in 1967.

In his interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, Mohini Gurav and Angana Dutta, which has been attached to the autobiography *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, Manohar Mouli Biswas mentions that most of the times, he had tried to avoid recalling his life experiences as a refugee. The reason he explains:

“It is nothing but psychological; a kind of psycho-pleasure works within me at this moment which has pushed me ahead to forget the melancholy of the past. In Bengali there is a saying: ‘Hriday khuria bedana jagate kay bhalobashey’ (who loves awaken sorrows by delving into the heart)” (Biswas 90).

His remark on his experience as a refugee vehemently shows that the passing of time has failed to remove the heart ache and the deep agony that was buried in his mind since his childhood. The same remark is also found in Jatin Bala who another Bangla Dalit writer. Jatin Bala says in a conversation with Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi makes a similar remark when he says: “No one had ever chosen to write about the experiences of Dalits, who were the worst victims of Partition in India” (Sarangi interview). One is very much aware of the tragic circumstances of the partition and panic, fear and the fatal consequences of partition, the trauma of leaving their own place to get settled down in an unknown country.

Unlike the mainstream literature, the Dalit autobiographies, knowingly break the traditional concept of autobiographies and thereby becomes testimonies that summoned the hidden truth from past, truth about the poverty of the Dalits and their helplessness. Biswas portrays in his autobiography the problems of livelihood and situations that the refugees had to face from East Bengal, mainly the untouchable people, immediately before and after the partition of India. Casteism played a vital role even in the arranged camps of Indian government. The Indian government sent them to various locations in an attempt to rehabilitate or to relocate them. The role of casteism became evident when the upper caste people who had emigrated from East Bengal were allowed to settle in comfortable urban locations, whereas the lower castes had to stay in camps and in comparatively barren lands. Some people of Namosudra community were even sent to Maharashtra, Dandakaranya and the Andaman islands. Manoranjan Byapari has equally argued it in one of his articles titled “Is there a Dalit writing in Bangla”, translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee. Byapari argues:

“Some people see a design in the differential treatment meted out to the upper caste refugees and the Dalit refugees in Bengal. When the upper caste people uprooted from East Bengal set up some 149 unauthorised new colonies in and around Kolkata – in Jadavpur, Dumdum, Sodepur, etc, the state did not take any action against them. But when the namahsudras attempted to occupy an uninhabited island in the Sundarban area called Marichjhapi, unspeakable atrocities were committed by the state machinery to evict them from there” (Byapari 4117).

As time passes, Biswas gains socio-economically stable in the society. But even after, his lower caste identity continues to haunt him. As Biswas writes “Innumerable things remain pent up in the store of life’s experiences” (Biswas 84). In his autobiography, Biswas mentions his ladylove is “Rushitha (not her real name)” (Biswas 84) was an upper caste girl. Rusitha became a teacher in a school while her mother was a professor of University. However, her mother declines the marriage proposal only because of the lower caste identity of Manohar Mouli Biswas.

So wounds like these continue to torture him and writing an autobiography recalling those tragic, painful memoirs is a very painful experience for him. Yet, Biswas feels the need to write it because it is not all about him, but thousands like him. He has come a long way. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay opines in the forward of the book the reason behind writing the autobiography.

“As in Bangla, it is recently that we have seen the publication of a few autobiographies by Dalit intellectuals, providing us with a rare glimpse into the lives and experiences of the Dalit in Bengal, and more importantly, giving us a clear idea of how caste discrimination worked or still works in this linguistic region. This literature thus explodes that popular bhadrak myth that caste does not matter in Bengal.” (Biswas Forward xi)

4. Conclusion:

The autobiography of Biswas minutely explores his journey from childhood to maturity. He has experienced a cruel face of economic crisis, hunger, caste oppression, starvation and socially exclusion in the society. He claims that the low caste “nama” community has produced many artists and literary creations. But they failed to show their achievements because of their ignorance and illiteracy. He does not ask for sympathy of the readers. Biswas’s autobiography works as a weapon of his activism for the upliftment of the Dalit. The long voiceless people of his community have started to raise their voice for equality, education and for basic rights. The autobiography also breaks the parameters that have been set up by the bourgeois about the autobiographical writings and thereby creates testimonies of the oppressed people in the name of caste or class.

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