



# Narratives Of Oppression: Women's Experiences In Select Translated Bengali Dalit Texts

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## Abstract:

This article examines the multifaceted exploitation and marginalization of Dalit women as portrayed in select translated Bengali Dalit narratives, originally composed by Bengali Dalit writers such as Manoranjan Barman, Kapil Krishna Thakur, and Goutam Ali. It delves into the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, revealing how these women endure compounded forms of oppression. By analyzing translated works, the study highlights the systemic discrimination that Dalit women face, emphasizing their struggles for identity, dignity, and justice within a patriarchal and casteist society. Through a critical examination of these narratives, the article seeks to bring to light the often-overlooked suffering of Dalit women, shedding new light on their resilience and resistance against entrenched social hierarchies.

**Keywords:** Manoranjan Barman, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Goutam Ali, gender, exploitation, Dalit women, Bengali Dalit narratives, marginalization.

## Introduction

The literary landscape of Dalit literature has been instrumental in providing a voice to the marginalized communities of India. Bengali Dalit literature, much like its counterparts in other Indian languages, emerged as a form of resistance against centuries of caste-based discrimination and social injustice. Historically, the Dalits in Bengal have faced severe socio-economic deprivation and systemic exclusion. The advent of Dalit literature in Bengal marked a significant shift in the cultural and literary paradigm, foregrounding the voices and experiences of those who had been relegated to the margins of society. While Dalit literature as a whole sheds light on the multifaceted oppression faced by the Dalit community, an important subset of this body of work focuses specifically on the experiences of Dalit women.

Gender is a critical factor in the analysis of social reality, particularly in the context of Dalits. Dalit women in India are alienated on the basis of caste, class, and gender, in addition to the standard forms of gender-based inequality and oppression they encounter in family, community, and society. They are the most susceptible to caste-based violence directed at their community, and they are also subjected to rape and abuse. Consequently, numerous Dalit writers have selected the exploitation and marginalisation of women as a common motif for artistic treatment in their works. The veracity of these narratives is never compromised, as the torture, sexual harassment, and humiliation of Dalit women are frequently perpetrated in our society by both upper-caste Hindus and male members of the Dalit community. Dalit women are frequently compelled to commodify their bodies in order to survive in the oppressive socioeconomic system in which they are placed. Nevertheless, these women who have been crushed, molested, and tormented, assert their human dignity; they are not bereft of rebellious spirit or inherent humanity. The current study is dedicated to the examination of the diverse aspects of the exploitation and marginalisation of Dalit women, as well as their resistance, as depicted in specific Bengali Dalit narratives. These narratives were written by Bengali Dalit writers, including Manoranjan Barman, Kapil Krishna Thakur, and Goutam Ali. The translations offer a critical perspective on the distinctive narratives of oppression that these women encounter in the context of Bengali Dalit literature. This article explores the gendered aspects of caste-based subjugation and the ways in which these narratives contribute to a broader discourse on social justice by examining a selection of translated Bengali Dalit texts.

In recent decades, numerous literary theorists, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others, have conducted a thorough examination of the circumstances of the indigenous woman in the postcolonial state. Spivak's renowned article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" employs the concept of the subaltern, which she adapted from Antonio Gramsci, to theorise her understanding of the condition of the native within colonialism and the woman in the postcolonial state as belonging to the oppressed class. Spivak identifies the indigenous woman as the victim of both patriarchy and colonisation within the framework of colonisation, which results in her silencing. In an early work such as *A Double Colonisation: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing* (1986), Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford also discussed the "double colonisation" of women in colonialism, pointing to the extremely oppressive and restricted contexts of women's lives, which are trapped by/within both patriarchy and colonialism. The condition of the native women under the colonialist structure is closely related to that of the Dalit women, who are subjected to

continuous persecution by both the patriarchal social order of their own Dalit society and the oppressive traditional 'Varna' system of the broader Hindu society. In Hindu society, they are exploited and marginalised, similar to the masculine members of their own community; however, this marginalisation is doubled in their case. As Beena Agarwal points out, the women of Dalit society are “‘dalit of dalits’ because their humanity is crushed under the burden of patriarchy as well as under the burden of caste prejudice.” However, as Agarwal continues, “even within their double marginalization,” they “retain the glory of womanhood and preserve the sublimity of the spirit to redefine their inner reservoir of spirit to assert their identity” (167). A dual burden of gender and caste oppression characterises the experiences of Dalit women in Bengali literature. The narratives of numerous translated texts poignantly capture this intersectionality, illuminating the intricate realities of these women's lives.

### **“Shabori” by Manoranjan Barman**

Manoranjan Barman, a Rajbanshi cultivator from the East Medinipur district, is a prolific writer equipped with Dalit consciousness. Manoranjan, who is employed by a reputable banking institution, is more of an activist than a writer. In 1996, Barman's narrative "Shabori" was initially published in Chaturtha Duniyar Galpo. It was translated into English as "Shabori" by Siddhartha Biswas. 'Shabori' in this context denotes a woman who is a member of the Shabor caste, which is considered to be of low status. The narrative emphasises the divergent perspectives of the two protagonists, Padma and Rekha. “It skilfully depicts, on the one hand, the sufferings of a metropolitan woman arising out of sudden loss of her husband’s job, and on the other, it draws an inspiring image of a rustic woman, Padma, whose misfortune fails to throttle her inexhaustible life force” (Singha et al. xxxvii).

The impact of industrialization and urbanisation on the lives and professions of impoverished Dalit individuals who are struggling for survival takes on a horrendous form. The author meticulously depicts the role of corrupt political leaders, money-mongering industrialists, and negligent government in the decline of the quality of life for the general populace. Barman reveals the conspiracy of the labour movement leaders who betray their adherents and amass wealth as a result of their unholy alliance with the factory owners. The employment of all employees, including Rekha's spouse, is terminated. Industrialists construct multistory buildings on the land they have received from the government to establish a factory and generate employment in order to maximise their benefits. Even employees are denied access to their funds that are deposited in the Provident Fund. Workers are obliged to depart the metropolis and return to their ancestral

homes in isolated villages. Rekha, a high-caste urban woman who married a low-caste young man, abhors the superstitious, orthodox, rural society in which she lives. She aspires to return to the city with her husband, where they can secure a few tutoring positions. Rekha aspires to provide her son with an education in a city. Rekha, who is dissatisfied with her destitute existence in rural Dalit society, laments her decision to enter into a love marriage: “They all told me not to marry a private company worker” (Barman 107). The narrative reveals that Rekha's parents harboured animosity towards her spouse due to his caste. He is not a Brahmin. Rekha's parents harboured animosity towards him, despite the fact that he was born into a high-caste family and was not an S.C. Nevertheless, Rekha's spouse is interested in enrolling his son in the local school where he previously attended. Therefore, the author investigates the issue of the viability of a joyful conjugal relationship that is the result of an inter-caste marriage, as well as the influence of poverty on it. The extent to which a high-caste, educated, and urban woman can assimilate into the illiterate and unprogressive rural Dalit society is also a matter of conjecture.

Another peddler-woman called Padma belonging to Shabor community is presented as a bangle-seller from door to door after her husband was lynched. “And it was impossible to know whether the Shabors were Hindu or Muslim. . . . Traditionally these women act as itinerant hawkers, selling their wares from house to house” (Barman 108). The author provides a highly authentic depiction of the pathetic existence of the Shabor community members, encouraging legislators and social reformers to develop policies that will benefit a specific segment of our society. The inhabitants of this community consume rodents, small birds, and even large lizards. This community's children don't attend education. State-owned territories are the sites of these individuals' settlements. Their life is frequently characterised by a lack of hygiene and they are frequently suspected of involvement in theft. Padma is the daughter of Lata Aunty. Lata Aunty's spouse was killed while fighting for the freedom fighters during the freedom movement. Subsequently, she lost her son in a confrontation with law enforcement. She has since continued her lifelong struggle as a hawker with courage. In the lives of these individuals, the larger issues of the nation are of no consequence, as they are preoccupied with the arduous task of obtaining a single meal. This woman is raising her son with unwavering determination and relentless effort. She refuses to concede defeat in her life's pursuit. Consequently, the author imbues his characters with Dalit consciousness, as they are unable to readily accept defeat in their life struggles and continue to work diligently to support themselves. The politicians and the administration do not provide assistance to these most impoverished individuals. In the same vein, the

discourse between Tapan Maity, a school teacher, and a party leader regarding the World Bank's conspiracy and the struggle for survival against the MNCs is incomprehensible to the workers who have been rendered unemployable and are now living in extreme poverty. Consequently, the Party is of no assistance to the average individual.

Padma, a Dalit woman, is rendered vulnerable to the desire of her husband's murderer due to her helplessness and misery. The Samals, upper-caste Hindus who were responsible for the murder of Padma's spouse and father, are currently enjoying Padma's company. The irony is that the untouchability that her caste is subjected to is insufficient to prevent her from becoming the object of the lust of the superior caste. Padma's son was denied admission to the local school due to his low birth weight. Padma requested that the author transport her son to Kolkata as a servant and instruct him in the art of writing his name. Padma is unable to escape her current situation. However, she envisions a more promising future for her son. Barman's narrative is a genuine Dalit narrative due to the optimism of the impoverished Dalits for a better future, which is characterised by a relentless struggle against all odds and the potential for societal transformation.

### **“The Other Jew” by Kapil Krishna Thakur**

Kapil Krishna Thakur, a renowned Dalit novelist, dramatist, and storyteller in West Bengal, is a member of the Namasudra community. He is a recipient of the Adwaita Malla-Barman Award from the Government of Tripura and a prominent member of the Dalit literary and cultural movement. Angshuman Kar translated Thakur's story "Anya Ihudi" into English as "The Other Jew," which was initially published in *Chaturtha Duniyar Galpa* in 1996. The narrative of Thakur demonstrates the powerlessness of numerous Bengali refugee families who were forcibly displaced from the former East Pakistan during and after partition. In India, they are regarded as Dalits; their religious affiliation to the majoritarian Hindu community does not shield them from the antisocial.

Thakur emphasises that even Hindus of the upper caste could be regarded as Dalits. Therefore, Thakur's narrative demonstrates that the term Dalit has the potential to transcend the caste identity, as it becomes synonymous with the impoverished and tortured poor individuals of India who are engaged in an unremitting struggle to provide their families with food, clothing, and shelter. The state of West Bengal, which has been the site of religious disturbances and the loss of innocent lives as a result of Partition, has become a refuge for a significant number of individuals who have fled Bangladesh, leaving behind their properties and neighbours. In terms of the treatment they receive from the so-called affluent class and upper-

caste Hindus of West Bengal, these refugees are no less than Dalits. Thakur has very deftly portrayed the anxiety, hopelessness, humiliation, and suffering of these refugees. Brajabasi, an immigrant from Bangladesh, operates a seasonal fruit shop at the railway platform, situated beneath a kamini tree. He resides in a slum. Harimati informs him that his uncle Bishtu Pandit and his family have arrived from Boultali, Bangladesh, and wish to meet with him. A series of huts is situated adjacent to the rail line. Individuals who were forcibly relocated from Bangladesh have recently established themselves in this location. Thousands of such houses are situated adjacent to any one train line at Sealdaha station. These houses resemble the igloos of the Eskimos. The majority of the houses are constructed with leaf roofs. Only a small number of houses are equipped with straw or tile roofs. The roof of Brajabasi's shanty is covered with tiles.

Thakur's narrative illustrates the dual victimisation of his protagonist, Bishtucharan, by the two primary religious communities: Muslims in East Pakistan and Hindus in India. It was during the turbulent days of 1971 that Bishtucharan lost his wife. Bishtu Pandit, a primary school teacher who was previously hesitant to flee his birthplace of Boultali, has travelled to West Bengal with his younger daughter, Runu, in quest of a secure residence. In the interim, he had lost everything, including his elder daughter, in Bangladesh, where the members of his religious community were not granted independence or freedom of expression. Ferumiya assaulted and murdered Jhunu, the elder daughter of Bishtucharan. Bishtu Pandit, who was previously held in the utmost regard in the village society, has fled to Kolkata in order to save the life of a family member. Jhunu will only achieve tranquilly after his demise when he weds Runu off. However, Braja is unwelcome and undesirable in this new land, where people can only show pity. A young individual insulted Brajabasi by labelling him "Banglu" and "creature" after learning about his current residence while he was returning from the shop to his hut one evening. The young individual was nearby a local liquor store. He was unable to reprimand him, despite the fact that his ego was bruised. He was unwilling to voice his opposition. Additionally, they made disparaging remarks about his daughter. He is currently landless, destitute, and rootless. Brajabasi guarantees Bishtucharan that the young hooligans will not cause any harm to him or his daughter, as they are not Muslims and belong to descent families. Their inebriated condition was the cause of the incident. But Bistu Pandit is not entirely confident, as he has previously lost a daughter to such ruffians. These are the individuals for whom "survival faces the greatest crisis" (Thakur 83). Upon observing Runu's expression, he experiences an increased sense of helplessness. Bistu, who had become

accustomed to a tranquil, intense existence during this period, is now finding it challenging to adjust to the abrupt transformation in his life.

The lamentable irony of Bishtu's fate is that they are referred to as "refugees" in India, while they are considered spies of India by a portion of their native population. The politics of the state and the significance of citizenship are beyond the comprehension of these illiterate refugees. Somehow, they have only recently come to the realisation that they will not receive any assistance, rehabilitation, or relief from any government. These individuals are summoned by political leaders to provide attendees for meetings. They are compelled to leave their jobs in order to appease these leaders, who will provide them with ration cards or add their names to the voter list. Consequently, the political authorities continue to exploit them. But in the midst of his anguish, a resolute and defiant Bishtucharan demonstrates Dalit consciousness by refusing to yield to external pressures. When the young brats arrive at Brajabasi's shop and request a substantial sum of 500 rupees as a Durgapuja subscription, Bistucharan becomes enraged and forbids him from paying a single paisa. Braja requests that he refrain from engaging in any disputes with these local gangsters in order to guarantee their tranquil existence. Bishtu encounters an individual who delivers extravagant speeches regarding the Hindu faith and the construction of the Rama temple. Bishtu desires to establish a relationship with this individual from his own religious community; however, his efforts to solicit assistance for the refugees were unsuccessful. Bishtu experiences an extreme sense of frustration. He asserts, "You cannot give man his right to live and you seem to be busy with the rights of god!" (Thakur 87). He comprehends that refugees are not accommodated in this universe. Braja informs him that they are not currently experiencing any anxiety regarding eviction or unrest.

Bistucharan encounters considerable difficulty in procuring sustenance in this unfamiliar land. He commences selling fried chickpeas in trains until late at night. Additionally, Runu earns money by sewing outfits. Everyone in this railway shanty is engaged in some form of activity. He receives the news that Ferumiya has been fatally shot by unknown assailants the day following Kalipuja. He believes that the time is opportune to return to his hometown. Bishtucharan discovers the liquor store on his way home and laments that the hooligans of the establishment are not being penalised. They persist in violating the law in the presence of thousands of individuals. When Bishtucharan is nearly at their cottages, four young hooligans obstruct his path. These inebriated members of so-called descent families abduct Runu, Shiuli, and other girls from the cabins to the darkness on the other side of the railway line by placing pipe guns to the heads

of Bistucharan and Brajabasi. Bistu's eyes welled with weeping. The ladies' groans were audible to him. He collapses to the ground without comprehension. Bistucharan discovers features that are helpless and dazed when he regains consciousness. No one discovers methods of offering mutual comfort. Bistucharan inquires: "O Bejo, my Bejo . . . for what then did you leave your home behind" (Thakur 90)? These individuals are being pursued from one land to another by the same predicament. Consequently, there was no incentive for them to abandon their ancestral habitat. This straightforward inquiry remains unanswered due to its complexity. Bishtucharan poses the universal question of all the homeless and rootless refugees of the world: "Tell me, you tell me ...where is our real home?" (Thakur 90). Stricken by anger and grief, Bishtu Pandit starts hitting himself. Thus, the story highlights the fact that the tortured people of the world cannot have any fixed religion. Kapil Krishna Thakur, a renowned Dalit novelist, dramatist, and storyteller in West Bengal, is a member of the Namasudra community. He is a recipient of the Adwaita Malla-Barman Award from the Government of Tripura and a prominent member of the Dalit literary and cultural movement. Angshuman Kar translated Thakur's story "Anya Ihudi" into English as "The Other Jew," which was initially published in *Chaturtha Duniyar Galpa* in 1996. The narrative of Thakur demonstrates the powerlessness of numerous Bengali refugee families who were forcibly displaced from the former East Pakistan during and after partition. In India, they are regarded as Dalits; their religious affiliation to the majoritarian Hindu community does not shield them from the antisocial.

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complexity. Bishtucharan poses the universal question of all the homeless and rootless refugees of the world: "Tell me, you tell me... where is our real home" (Thakur 90?). Bishtu Pandit begins to strike himself as a result of his anger and sorrow. Consequently, the narrative underscores the fact that the tormented individuals of the world are unable to adhere to any particular religion. Religion is incapable of safeguarding them. The narrative illustrates how the women of the impoverished Dalit community are easily exploited for the sexual pleasure of the influential affluent class and caste. The torturers do not adhere to any particular religion. Despite their efforts to resist such onslaughts, family members are not always successful. Dalits and refugees frequently endure hardship due to their lack of a genuine residence, sanctuary, or security.

### **“Bazaar” by Gautam Ali**

Born in 1957 in Bangladesh, Gautam Ali is a member of a lower middle-class Namasudra cultivator family. He serves as the editor of the publication *Aapaatata Budbud*. His Bengali story "Haat," which was initially published in *Chathurtha Duniar Galpa* in 1996, has been translated into English by Joygit Ghosh as "Bazaar." The story has “evoked strong reactions even from Dalit critics regarding the ‘dalit’ character of the narrative. They would rather define it as a story of psychosexual urges and impulses” (Singha et al. xxxvi).

Ali's narrative centres on an impoverished young woman who, as a consequence of her destitution, is compelled to assume the role of a domestic servant and to comply with the libidinal demands of her middle-aged, upper-class employer. Dalit writers frequently engage in a trenchant critique of the sexual exploitation of socially underprivileged women, who are used as easy targets for the sexual pleasure of the social aristocracy. It has been rightly observed that:

Haat is a poignant portrayal of ‘sexploitation’ that dalitises women of lower classes in the most ignominious way. The dark underbelly of the modern urban apartment culture has been ruthlessly exposed by the writer with the description of the sickening commodification of the female body. The discourse of dalitisation takes a curious turn when the sexual aberrations of the middle-aged husband are silently approved by the ailing, almost invalid wife. (Singha et al. xxxvi)

The narrative of Ali emphasises the sexual exploitation of a domestic servant from a lower socioeconomic background. The mid-aged office worker's wife, who is afflicted with gout, employs an impoverished village girl as a maid servant to assist with domestic chores. Her husband becomes attracted

to the maidservant. Although he has love for his wife, he confesses, “[t]his maid has awakened my sleeping lust” (Ali 61). A gulf is established between them. The attendant is terminated by the mistress. Both endeavour to adapt to their regimented existence. However, the lustful husband's mind is consumed by the image of a beautiful female. One evening, he returns from a *haat* where young females are sold for the sexual pleasure of social elites, ecstatic. Ali's portrayal exposes the pitiful circumstances of impoverished Dalit women who are compelled to sell their bodies in order to support their families. The narrative of Ali underscores the prevalent socioeconomic order in our country, which reduces vivacious human beings to the status of inanimate objects (dolls). We are compelled to empathise with the economic hardships faced by these women of lower socioeconomic status. The husband explains to his wife: “You’ve seen dolls in fairs. Haven’t you? They are big, small, of various sizes. In this *haat* also you can have any doll you like. But you can’t bring her home. She is yours till there’s money in your pocket” (Ali 62).

The hapless wife, who was evidently incapable of fulfilling her husband's desires, contemplates the possibility of reuniting them. Her colleague transports a domestic from a remote village at the wife's request. The fatherless girl was prepared to sever her relationship with her mother in order to secure a satisfactory meal and a stable lifestyle. The matriarch of the house dresses her in a new frock, thereby ensuring that she is presentable for the household. The man's homecoming resumes its regularity after office hours. “The *haat* in the town lost one of its customers” (Ali 63).

The mistress of the house, who is lying on her back, can sense the intimate relationship between her spouse and the girl in the adjacent room as the night progresses. “She had an empty feeling. . . . The fabric of the family seemed to be under threat” (Ali 63). Nevertheless, she disregards the disorder and disorderliness. The lady seeks a maid once more when this maid returns to her mother. Consequently, the wife's active participation in her husband's sexual exploitation of a Dalit girl is what makes Ali's narrative intriguing. She provides silent validation of her husband's sexual aberrations and arranges for his sexual gratification in order to preserve domestic harmony.

## Conclusion

The patriarchal social system's exploitation of Dalit women in terms of both gender and caste is a recurring theme in contemporary Dalit literature. This theme is adequately addressed in contemporary Bengali Dalit tales, including "Bazaar," "Shabori," and "The Other Jew." These narratives are distinctive among Dalit narratives in their depiction of the genuine experience of exploitation and degradation

experienced by Dalit women. In these stories, the exploitation of the female protagonists, who endure as both Dalits and women, is not only a result of the hegemonic caste hierarchy of Hindu society, but also of their position at the bottom of the current socioeconomic ladder. These Bengali Dalit narratives not only effectively raise readers' awareness of the degradation, deprivation, and exploitation that Dalits endure in the Brahminical social order, but also emphasise the Dalits' resilience in the face of oppression. The sorrows and afflictions, exploitation and deprivation, as well as oppression and humiliation of the Dalit community in contemporary Bengal society, have been brought to the attention of upper caste readers by Bengali Dalit authors. They have not only endeavoured to raise the awareness of Dalits regarding their subjugation and suffering in the prevailing social order through their works, but they have also motivated Dalits to publicly protest social inequality in order to achieve freedom and justice.

The translated works of Bengali Dalit literature serve as a critical resource for understanding the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression. By bringing the narratives of Dalit women to a wider audience, these texts challenge the hegemonic discourses that have long silenced their voices. They also contribute to the ongoing struggle for social justice by advocating for the recognition and upliftment of Dalit women. In a broader sense, the narratives of oppression in Bengali Dalit literature underscore the need for an inclusive approach to social justice that addresses the specific needs and experiences of marginalized women. These texts remind us that the fight against caste-based discrimination must also encompass a fight against gender-based oppression.

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