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The Problematics of 'Dalit space' in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's "Mahesh" and Mahasweta Devi's "Shikar"¹

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The globalization and the subsequent flourishing of 'englishes' have dismantled the monolith of 'the' English Literary Canon by bringing into effect 'new' literatures and various interdisciplinary principles and approaches that have in way effected a 're-ordering' of the existing order. In such a moment of paradigmatic shifts – especially in the wake of the postcolonial theories and the subaltern studies - the emergence of the Dalit Literature/s provides ample scope for examining the 'politics of representation'. However, my paper is not concerned as much with the question of the Dalit Literature proper as with the dynamics of the polemical word – 'dalit' – and with how, besides a registered manifestation of physical / tangible 'violence' or 'resistance', not always of course, constant negotiations between narratives and counter-narratives mark the 'dalit space'. For this I rely on the elasticity of the term 'dalit' and intend to show how the term, often misunderstood, implies "masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion and other factors", and how 'dalit space' becomes 'vocal', and sometimes achieves 'liminality' through inter-religion/inter-racial correspondence. In "Mahesh", Gafur, a Muslim, challenges what Ambedkar called the caste Hindu's tolerant behavior towards non-Hindus, and suffers the 'position' of a dalit who finally registers a passive resistance through 'dislocation'. On the other hand, in "Shikar", Mary Oraon, an organic intellectual, comes out of the constraints of dalit position as she is the cross-product of an inter-racial coupling, as she 'hunts' the (in)human predator, as she embraces the 'brave new world'.

A few months ago, when I had been waiting at the Howrah Railway Station for the train I was to board, I overheard a heated conversation between two friends possibly on a 'grave' matter like 'representation'. The man with a bald head suddenly asked his friend – "What is the Ganges?" Probably bewildered by the suddenness of the question, the friend remained silent for a while and then replied – "What nonsense! What more can it be? It's a river." The bald man, with a wry smile, said – "of course. That's not a surprise at all. But think it differently. It's a collation of streams, isn't it?" The friend nodded and somewhat philosophically announced – "Reality depends on your position or take." Though some may object to the 'gross' generalization the friend's concluding words exhibit, I take this 'take' to be, along with other factors, at least a plausible factor in any 'canon formation' and the subsequent paradigmatic shift/s it implicates as every formation, to some extent, is 'political'. The distinction between the Real and the real by Plato set forth a tradition – that Plato himself could not have even thought of – that, down the ages, fashioned itself into a dominant/dominating polarized positioning of the 'self' and the 'other', the 'powerful' and the 'powerless', the 'literary' and the 'non-literary', though the post-structuralists and the post-modernists declined such solid, fixed 'encodings'.

In the rapidly changing scenario of this globalized age which is marked by, especially in the academia, the emergence of 'new' literature/s and various interdisciplinary principles

and approaches effecting a thorough ‘re-ordering’ of the existing order, the blooming of the Dalit literature/s, especially in the wake of the postcolonial theories and the subaltern studies, has opened up new avenues of knowledge, and also scope for putting under scanner the methods in which the politics of representation operates and continues to perpetuate itself. This new phenomenon – Dalit Literature – was not something that emerged overnight: it evolved from the numerous struggles / moves of the dalits that, initially, had nothing to do with what we call ‘Literature’. All these movements began in a ‘reformist’ mood, as a protest against the exploitative subjugating socio-religious conditions and practices of the existing order. Thus, writings by these dalits were then simply considered as powerful means to promote their cause, to strengthen their movements, and to bring about the much-dream-of dawn of a society that would operate on the imperatives of equality, fraternity and liberty. The movements and the writings had a few common aims – to rebuff the hegemonic advances of the dominant section and its customs and practices, to negate their ‘allotted’ place in the social ladder and also the sovereignty of their ‘other’, to re-link themselves with their own episteme through ethnic discovery, to fashion an alternative aesthetics and thought-system, and to re-structure the social order. It should be mentioned that there is no indisputable agreement on the definition of ‘dalit literature’. However, it can be said that, besides containing all these traits, it must contain and give expression to ‘dalit consciousness’. But largely the tags like ‘dalit’ and ‘dalit literature’ do not provide any well-defined idea.

However, when one turns to the academia, one can find that the aim (of the Dalit Literary Movements) to see the dalit literary texts as a part of or within ‘the’ canon (as part of the re-structuration process) is realized to some extent as now both ‘minor’ and ‘major’ universities have started teaching a few dalit texts as part of their syllabi. But the fact that the ‘main’ canon accommodates, be it forced or voluntarily, elicits a few disturbing questions: Is it the ‘real’ value of the dalit texts that has made it happen? Or, to put it more skeptically, is it one of those familiar tricks of ‘the’ tradition to lessen the effects by taking into, and thereby, to consolidate its own tenable position? Or, is it both enforcement on the part of the dalit texts and voluntary maneuvering on the part of ‘the’ tradition? These points remain unresolved as they decline any pin-pointed formulation and something beyond my caliber.

Since, in India, there exist varying views about the origin/s and characteristics of the Dalit Literature/s, and since its topography of the development and explosion is indeterminate², it is always difficult to approach a dalit text in a more comprehensive way. And this is made even more difficult because of the fluidity of the term ‘dalit’, which, in general associations, evokes the image of a ‘castigated’ subject. Therefore, though I know any professing of not being ‘involved’ in something is in a way ‘involvement’ in that, this paper is not concerned as much with the questions of the Dalit Literature proper as with the dynamics of the word ‘dalit’, and with how, besides a registered physical/tangible ‘violence’ or ‘resistance’, not always of course, constant negotiations, if they can be called ‘negotiations’ at all, between narratives and counter-narratives mark the ‘dalit space’ . For this, I rely on the elasticity of the term ‘dalit’. It must be remembered that ‘dalit identity’, as is generally believed, is not the product of race, class or gender; instead it is caused by the consideration of caste. Thus, a castigated image is inherent in its very existence. But if one looks at its etymology, one easily understands that the term ‘dalit’ is not so ‘enclosed’ in its signification. It comes from the Sanskrit ‘dalan’ which means ‘to grind’. So literally it suggests that which has been ground down³. Thus, broadly it implies “masses exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally in the name of religion and other factors”,⁴ or, to use a Marxist jargon, the ‘D’ class. It becomes evident that ‘dalit’ is nothing but a state, a

state which is the product of the subject's location in a particular 'space' or what I call 'dalit space'. (By the 'dalit space', I mean more a space in which the 'location'/'positioning' of a subject renders it a 'dalit' than simply a space shared/occupied by a 'dalit' subject.) And a complex network of caste, class, religion goes into the shaping of 'dalit' subject. A space often characterized by the lack of established agency to traffic with the culture of the privileged, the 'dalit space' becomes most 'vocal' – both in its silence/s and velocity – to expose the workings of power; sometimes it achieves 'liminality' through inter-religion/inter-racial correspondence. Moreover, this is the most ambivalent and equivocal space that negates any iron-tied demarcation: the contours of the space is not fixed rather always pushing its boundaries outwards. However, to discuss my findings, I have taken into consideration two stories by two eminent Bengali writers – “Mahesh” by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and “Shikar” by Mahasweta Devi. The reasons for the selection of these two stories from two different but specific time-periods will automatically be revealed in the gradual unfurling of my discussion.

We cannot deny that a work of art is an autonomous entity, an 'autotelic text' but there is something more added to this. A 'text' is closely bound with the zeitgeist of its production/creation period and any denial or subordination of this bond will surely occlude the 'free flow' (or lemon squeezing process of extracting meaning) of meaning(s)/signification(s). This is the case we should keep in mind more ardently while approaching writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Mahasweta Devi – both are intensely socially conscious writers and showcase the rural realities including a comprehensive delineation of the 'status' of the unprivileged or the people living on the edge. But Mahasweta Devi is more complicated and 'political' and has endeavored more graciously to 'problematize' /'re-define' the 'sacrosanct' codes /modes – an aspect on which I will concentrate in my discussion on Mahasweta Devi. So, let's first 'locate' / 'position' Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and his creative oeuvre – especially our present concern – in its social, political and cultural context. Writing in the pre-Independence era, he was a part of the Bengal Renaissance that, along with many turbulent political insurgencies / movement, shook – both culturally and socially – the British Bengal violently. But it was not shaking enough either to weed out the deep-seated 'castigated' practices or to set the mind of the people (including both the privileged and the unprivileged) ablaze in the process of bringing out the man inherent. “Mahesh” was published in 1922; it was a time when, on the national level, the Dalit movement, under Ambedkar's leadership, was at its nascent stage. But the Bengal belt remained almost unmoved and showed an impenetrable immunity to such 'changes' that were to come in the other specificities⁵. Now, the point of contention is how far “Mahesh”, a product of such a crucial juncture, fires the 'dalit space' into prominence and what marks this space. “Mahesh” centers around a more empathetic than sympathetic bond between Mahesh, the bull and Gafur, its owner and a Muslim vassal in the stratified 'zamindari' (the locale is identified as Kashipur) of a caste Hindu landlord, Shibu Babu; it also projects the 'consequences' that overtake them in an arid, draught-struck circumstances. Throughout the story, the narratives expose, question and undermine issues related with both the dalit subject and the conventions/practices of a loop-sided society. The first question it raises is about the very essence/identity of a dalit subject: Gafur, being Muslim in religion, inches forward to 're-define' of our traditional concept of a 'dalit' (that conjures up an image of a 'rejected' man inhabiting the lowest strata in the ambit of the stratified *Hindu* society) and, in the process, questions the traditional 'location' of a dalit subject and thereby, pushes back the circumscribing boundaries by challenging what Ambedkar, later on, identified as the caste Hindu's tolerant behavior towards the non-Hindus. The 'end' Gafur encounters is a product of simultaneous complex operation of his positions as an underdog and a minority Muslim in

an exclusivist Hindu society. Had they (Gafur and Amina) not been Muslim and at the same time, wretched minority, the ‘tragedy’ could not have happened or the killing of Mahesh could have easily been averted. However, for such a complex position they are denied any access to everything the caste Hindus ‘possess’ (their ‘possession’ is ‘sanctified’ by the religious texts and power – they are the Power and the Society), even the essentials like drinking water. Moreover, they are also subjected to random, dehumanizing stereotyping.

The habit of stereotyping is inseparably bound up with human nature and understanding: to have a comprehensive hold over something, we generally generalize it and locate it within a familiar frame of reference. And what we do in the process is that we rule out the inner contradictions and, thereby, neglect the ‘actual’ nature of the thing. We see, for the caste-sensitive people like Tarkaratna, the people like Gafur can only be identified with some set subhuman/non-human phrases/images like ‘scoundrel’, ‘ape’, ‘callous’ etcetera. But here a question arises - does dumping the ‘other’ as sheer antithesis to the *noble* ‘self’ make the other so? It is impossible unless and until the other ‘consents’ to the stereotyping. The fabula puts forward counter-narratives that unearth the hypocrisies latent in the behavioral pattern of the caste Hindus and, at the same times, foreground moments that betray the ‘sacrosanct’ formulated phrases. Tarkaratna’s affected sympathetic concern regarding the wretched condition of Mahesh (that Gafur should give a bunch of hay to this starved dumb animal) and his equally pretended scolding of Gafur vanish into the air when Gafur asks for ‘a bit of hay’(D-3); Tarkaratna ‘made a quick exit’(D-3). We find, after a while, Gafur engaging himself in an emotional (almost ethereal and resisting linguistic expression) endearment and investing endearing terms on Mahesh. Even though Gafur slaps Amina, when he, after coming back from his work, finds no food and water, he, later on, regrets what he has done. All these points undermine the set formulations. Moreover, it is he, who seized with blind fury, ‘kills’ the beast.

Now the question is – who killed the beast? No doubt Gafur has ‘killed’ but it will be sheer injustice to overlook the factors/circumstances that compel him to ‘do’ so. Not to mention the constant persecutions he has long been subjected to, the system, on that very fatal day, puts him in the ordeal in which he fails miserably – a fact that is emphasized by his three consecutive losses of self-control. Firstly, he slaps his daughter; secondly, he, intoxicated by the harsh words of landlord’s messenger, ‘voices’ a fatal comment [“we pay rent to live here. I will not go.”(D-8)] that incurs the wrath of the land lord and ‘graces’ him with ‘a good thrashing’; and finally, when he ‘kills’ Mahesh. Now, to say Gafur has not ‘killed’ voluntarily or he is compelled in his ‘proceedings’ is to invite more disturbing questions: does that mean Gafur is like the proverbial ‘mute(d)’ dalit figure devoid of any power to ‘act’ voluntarily? Does he not show any resistance? If he does, then of what type? As the (counter-)narrative shows, he has done, at least twice: firstly, when he declines to sell his bull and secondly, when he outrightly refuses to respond immediately to the landlord’s call. He rises up but all these are momentary and fizzle out consequently. The ‘ending’ reiterates the point where, instead of taking the onus himself, he makes a touchy prayer to the Allah to execute justice and punish the culprits, on his behalf: “Pray never forgive those their guilt who never let him(Mahesh) eat the grass nor drink the water you have given.”(D-9) It is sometimes said that Gafur’s character is bit romanticized, and, though the delineation is sympathetic, it lacks true dalit color since it ceases to exhibit dalit consciousness. This is because Chattopadyay, being a caste hindu himself, can never experience what it feels to be a non-hindu deprived man. Thus Gafur’s failure is actually the author’s inability. Though we can deny such a view completely, it can be said that he fails to stand up against the system because he has implicitly ‘consented’ to the practices. The only resistance he makes is

achieved through ‘dislocation’ – by afflicting violence on the less powerful and by leaving the village. On the whole, “Mahesh” highlights a ‘dalit space’ where the subject is caught more in his complicity in ‘the’ tradition than in any perennial ambivalence or provisions of outright rejection.

If one keeps in mind the year of publication of “Mahesh”, it does not seem unlikely that Gafur cannot ‘voice’ firmly. But, a few decades after, Mahasweta Devi’s Mary (in her “Shikar”) evinces a completely diametrically antithetical position in ‘dealing out’ justice to her predator, Tehsildar Singh. The moorings of this difference lie in the degree of commitment exhibited and the ideological stance occupied on the part of both Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Mahasweta Devi; the latter’s creative oeuvre covers a span of almost sixty years (1956 – the present)⁶. Mahasweta Devi, an activist-journalist-creative writer, occupies a postcolonial space – the most evocative and potential space for exploration, appropriation and re-adjustment of the ‘self-image’ of a ‘nation’ and its populace. Her engagement with ‘postcoloniality’, conducted in the mode of activist narrative, in contrary to the ‘form’-ative design, has produced alternative literary aesthetics that serves to fudge the very boundary between the literary and the non-literary. And in that activist narrativity, the field of experimentation, contention, subversion and resistance is what G.C.Spivak called ‘the fourth world’ inhabited by the tribal people who once were autonomous and outside the injunctions of ‘the’ society but gradually were subordinated, evicted (from their space) and erased from the visibility with taboos – like ‘thief’, ‘criminal’ etc. – etched on their foreheads. The explorations of the exploitative sites operating in tandem, the constant subversion and destabilization of the ‘accepted’ and ever-burgeoning resistance through a series of effective strategies⁷ – all make both the narrative of “Shikar” and the ‘dalit space’ more complex and effective .

In “Shikar”, Mahasweta Devi, has, as usual, zoomed on a locational specificity – a certain part (including the areas like Tohri market, Seora etc.) of Bihar occupied by a particular ‘dalitized’ tribal group, the Oraons who are leading their ‘unnoticed’ lives with the only exception that the exploitations, tortures and humiliations they are subjected to are more subtle and neocolonial in their characteristics. The pre-colonial kings (basically the subjugating forces) and the exploitative colonial masters take the form of rapacious middlemen and contractors. Tehsildar Singh, the contractor, with the aid of Prasadji’s son, Banawari, tricks the innocent tribespeople ignorant of the market-value of the full-grown Sal trees. They manage their (of the government officials too) co-operation in the timber-felling mission. Even he purchases their labor in exchange of less-than-minimum wages. This is not what gives significance to the story and the ‘dalit space’ dealt with as this tradition has long been ‘canonized’/ ‘internalized’. Rather it is resistance to this tradition through the figure of Mary Oraon that calls for special attention.

Mahasweta Devi invests on Mary a powerful agency of resistance by making in her a ‘difference’ in this ‘dalit space’. Mary’s appearance, her hybrid status (her being the daughter of Oraon mother and Australian father), her financial enterprise and autonomy, her easy unhindered mobility, her sexual freedom in choosing Jalim, a Muslim, as her suitor and would-be husband – all lend her uniqueness. The narrative throws up ample explicit suggestions of Mary’s exceptionality: “You wouldn’t call her a tribal at first sight . Yet she is a tribalShe is a most capable cowherd....She gets down at the station like a queen....She is exceptionally tall...The color of Mary’s skin is a resistant barrier to young Oraon men.” (H-2) The fellow tribespeople (also Prasadji and others) fear her a little but at the same time they look upon her with love and respect and never ‘place the harsh injunctions of their own

society on her' as they 'don't think her as their blood' (H-5). Even she is torn between her sense of alienation and her longing for a mooring. Thus, as an empowered gendered figure, she lives her life on her own terms, and like an 'organic intellectual', she makes his fellow people aware of the 'ways' of 'the' world; for instance, she offers Prasadji pragmatic suggestions about the selling of the Sal trees and warns him of the deceptive ways of Tehsildar Singh and his own son. Trouble starts when Tehsildar starts pursuing Mary single-mindedly. To get rid of him, Mary 'reinterprets'/'appropriates' (the power to 're-interpret'/'contextualize' is also what marks an 'organic intellectual') the myth related with the hunting festival of the Oraons and hunts down "the big beast with bait"(H-15) on the day of the Jani Parab⁸. Notwithstanding the critical debate over whether it is Mary's hybrid status that gives her the courage to 're-interpret' the myth, Mahasweta Devi here unfolds a powerful and highly subversive narrative⁹. She 'shows an individual activating ritual into contemporary resistance. She chooses a character who is not a full member of tribal society, and shows her judging the mainstream exploiter before the act of rape can take place'^{10 & 11}. Thus, her alienation from her cultural roots provides her the necessary aesthetic detachment that in way enables her to appropriate the myth and, thereby, to rebuff the 'justified' advances of the mainstream. Though the textual ambivalences – her not being a tribal fully, her ambivalent attitude towards the fellow Oraons, her ultimate abandonment of her village – 'resist' a compact 'closure' and mark a characteristic 'ad-hocism' of Mahasweta Devi's solutions¹², her acting out of the myth is her way of contesting the doubly disadvantaged tribal woman's position and also of subverting the stereotyped gender role prescribed to her, thereby resisting a dominant patriarchy. Thus, Mahasweta Devi's story embodies a space that is, no doubt, a 'site' of exploitation by and domination of 'the' society but at the same time it is well-equipped with an equally strong, subversive agency to topsy-turvy the whole 'game' . Moreover, the dalit space here achieves 'liminality' as the empowered agent Mary approaches towards an inter-religion coupling pushing the boundaries of the space even further and making it more indeterminate to specify.

Notes:

1. I have used the English translations of the texts : "Mahesh" translated as "The Draught" by Sasadhar Sinha is collected in the anthology, *The Draught and Other Stories* (published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2004) and "Shikar" translated as "The Hunt" by G.C.Spivak is collected in *Imaginary Maps* (published by Thema, Calcutta, 1993) . The subsequent references to the books are shown as D (for "The Draught") and H (for "The Hunt") respectively followed by page number(s).
2. To know, in detail, about the internal conflicts and various characteristics, please see the essay entitled, "Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future", in *Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Orient Blackswan, rev. ed., 2009)
3. See Prof. Sankar Prasad Singha's essay entitled "Narrativising the Marginalized: From Subaltern Studies to Dalit Writing" in *Middle Flight*, Vol.2, No. 1, October, 2013.
4. It is Arjun Dangle's definition of 'dalit' as formulated in the his(ed.)book mentioned above.
5. There were many factors responsible for a late emergence of dalit literature or dalit literary movements: tolerant co-existence of various castes, classes and religious groups, influence of leftist thoughts and beliefs etcetera. For a brief but comprehensive account of the origin, development and status of dalit literary movement in Bengal, please see Manoranjan Byapri's essay entitled "Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?", translated by Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 41 (Oct. 13 – 19, 2007), pp. 4116-4120, and Jatin Bala's book (in Bengali) – *Dalit Sahitya Aandalan* (Utsa, Etihās, Mulyayan), Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia, 2002.

6. In this period, West Bengal witnessed a few leftist movements both in the field of politics and culture: while a political movement like the Naxalite Movement tried to engage the 'mass' to bring a change, a cultural movement like 'ganonaty'o'(people's theatre) voiced against the 'form'-ative design in art. But all such movements failed to bring about a change in the life of the tribals. Infuriated by the general negligence, even after the leftist political party that vowed to bring for them liberty and equality came to the power, towards the depressed class, in general, and the tribals, in particular, Mahasweta Devi has embarked on her mission to uplift them. For more information about her involvement please see the section, "The Author in Conversation", in *Imaginary Maps*, (translated by G.C.Spivak, Thema, Calcutta, 1993)
7. The strategies include 'localization' of events in the story, appropriation of the rituals / myths of the tribal society, journalistic detailing etc.
8. "And every twelfth year it is Janiparab, the women's hunting festival in Bihar"(Mahasweta Devi, in "The Author in Conversation" of *Imaginary Maps*, translated by Spivak, Thema, Calcutta, 1993, pg.-xi). Also see, H-11.
9. See the essay, "Subversion and resistance : The uses of Myth in Mahasweta Devi's "The Hunt" and *The Book of the Hunter*", by Bindu Nair, in *Littcrit*, vol-34, no-2, December 2008.
10. See the section, "Appendix", *Imaginary Maps*, translated by Spivak, Thema, Calcutta, 1993.
11. "Among the tribals, insulting or raping a woman is the greatest crime: Rape is unknown to them. Women have a place of honor in tribal society." (Mahasweta Devi, in "The Author in Conversation" of *Imaginary Maps*, translated by Spivak, Thema, Calcutta, 1993, pg.-xi). Tehsildar Singh by trying to fornicate Mary attempts to disgrace the whole tribal society. So, he must be punished; and Mary deals out the 'justice'.
12. See the section, "Narrative Activism and Aesthetic (Re)Construction", *Mahasweta Devi : A Critical Reading*, Vandana Gupta, Creative Books, New Delhi, 2009, pgs.-130 – 133.

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