

Harishankar Jaladas' *Nonajole Dubsantar*: Looking into a Bangladeshi Dalit Autobiography

Panna Majumder*

Abstract

*Born into a fishing family, Harishankar Jaladas is the only voice from the Dalit community in post-independence Bangladesh. A Dalit figure in Bangladeshi literature Harishankar Jaladas is yet to be explored with full potentiality in research. His writing about the "low-caste" people saturated with an experiential authenticity sufficiently validates this critical investigation as it promises a fundamental understanding of Dalits' life and reality in Bangladesh. A late entry into the Bangladeshi literary circle, Jaladas' larger authorial engagement predominantly takes "lower" caste people in his literary purview. Being a Dalit his lived experience supplies all the materials he projects in his narrative and so the narrative-tendency is remarkably towards an exposure of the true marginal living. This explains why his self-narrative *Nonajole Dubsantar* (2018) can be considered to be an assistive base for understanding his other fictional narratives. However, apart from its assistive value his autobiography alone deserves to be examined for its candidature as a Dalit autobiography. This explains why this article attempts to investigate the linearity of Jaladas' self-narrative in promise and purpose that a Dalit autobiography professes in the main. Lastly, it will conclude with a commentary that will help determine its generic fitness.*

Keywords: experiential authenticity, Dalit, marginal living, Dalit autobiography, generic fitness.

Introductory Note

Autobiography by its very spirit encapsulates what is personal. For a Dalit, the personal sphere has long been a byproduct of long-standing, systematic, and normalized discrimination of the oppressive Hindu upper-caste establishment. So, the personal account in a Dalit autobiography ever tends to overbrim the pure-personal possibility and forces the narrative to be more communal and representative. In Dalit's autobiography, the private self is to mirror the marginal self bruised with humiliations and denial endorsed by organized and

*Panna Majumder
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet
Email: majumder81-eng@sust.edu

systematic Hindu upper-caste machinery which is felt throughout a Dalit's agonizing survival. Consequently, the act of writing by a Dalit is consciously forged as an act of protest directed against the codified Savarna system which is complicit in perpetuating the caste-oriented Hindu social, religious and cultural settlement in the main. Dalit literature, in which Dalit autobiography is a significant component, addresses this studied and organized disparity in all possible detail to expose the power nexus in caste-ridden and complex Hindu society. This act of exposing the discriminatory grievances accosting the hegemonic structure and attempting to reclaim the social space with a sense of immediacy can justifiably be standardized for designating our selected text as Dalit autobiography.

Jaladas' Dalit Identity

Before venturing into the generic fitness examination of Harishankar Jaladas' self-narrative *Nonajole Dubsantar*, metaphorically meaning 'faring through ordeals in life, the author's Dalit identity needs to be resolved. Writer Sukhdeo Thorat informs us, "[t]he term was first used in 1932 when the Poona Pact was signed. It refers to those who have been suppressed by the upper caste. ...The Poona Pact was an agreement between BR Ambedkar and MK Gandhi on the reservation of electoral seats for the depressed classes..." (as cited in Mitul, 2018). Evident as it is, Ambedkar's projected meaning of the word 'Dalit' has been contextualized in Hindu shastra, (sacred scriptures), which writes and navigates the interrelation of the castes and those staying casteless; however, the word 'Dalit' is preferred by Ambedkar for its literal truth and exploited to place the 'low caste' people on equal footing politically. The "Dalit Panthers Manifesto" published in 1973 from Bombay (Present-day Mumbai) qualifies all "[m]embers of Scheduled Castes" (an official and convenient term in India for a wide number of "low castes" who receive benefit from the government under certain policies) (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013, p. 62) as Dalit. Dalit has long been a unique problem to the Hindu community which makes up the majority of the population in India (Dalits make around 16.6% of the total population). Though the socio-cultural reality of Bangladesh in the question of Dalit is not alike to India's, the foundational reality and complexity in the caste system stand identical and so we must resolve the issue of Dalithood for a Bangladeshi Dalit by the Indian perspective as this issue is unique to India and Hindu religion. To begin with, Jaladas, (2012) makes it plain and clear: "I was born in a Dalit community, Namashudra to be precise" (p. 89). The very birth in a fishing community with Namasudra tag (Namasudras are not considered to be

one of the four major divisions in the Varna system and so, they remain excluded) makes Harishankar Jaladas a Dalit in the Hindu society of Bangladesh. His frequent reference to his birthplace, Patenga, a coastal area in Chattogram, and also to the Bay of Bengal further attest to his Dalit identity since territorial marginalization, a form of exclusion, is forced on the Dalits' living by the upper caste Hindus. Noted Indian anthropologist N. K. Bose's research is supportive here: "In Bengal, and especially in East Bengal, wherever there are rivers and canals, one can find the members of the Namasudra caste. Hindu society has always deposed this agricultural caste and has gone to the extent of treating its members as untouchables and making them live in the fringes of the village" (as cited in Chowdhury, 2009, p. 7). Though Bose's finding associated the forced dislocation to the agricultural caste and though he interchangeably used the two terms: agricultural caste and Namasudra, the latter covers a wide number of castes which are considered below. Being a fisherman Harishankar Jaladas doubtlessly belongs to the category. While his Dalit identity is unquestionably established on the socio-cultural front his self-narrative remains to be contested for the promise a Dalit autobiography holds for the Dalit community. The promise and the purposiveness are two aspects for this research to critically engage with and to that end, the whole focus will be deployed now.

The Purposive Act of Autobiography Writing

Following the precedence of other autobiography writers, Jaladas (2018) also explains his autobiography's context. His rationale for writing the autobiography:

My life is a salty one. I was born close to the salty Bay of Bengal. In diverse turns of my journey that I have made so far, life was full of unpleasant and unpalatable experiences. They may not receive favour from the readers. And it goes without saying that those I wrote about here will be left bitter only. Even then it seems my lived life of sixty-five years, the story of passion, perseverance, sorrow, and delight will not frustrate them [the readers] that much. (p. 12)

This selection of the prefatory note to *Nonajole Dubsantar* offers a bruised and disgruntled Dalit who is humbled and cautious in approaching the readers and also unflinching in retaliating the minions of the casteist society. The justification for writing the self-narrative assures a sulking Dalit writer a literary encounter with the Savarna system and also assures a value-added reading. So a two-fold motivation is promised in his prefatory note for the

self-narrative: 1) sharing the subhuman existence and thereby standing in solidarity with his fellow Dalits across the world, and 2) critiquing the grand casteist design of the upper caste Hindus by choosing the representative few of this system through narrating their role circumstantially. Unusual as the second motivation is it must be conceived in a broader scope as the targeted few are the auxiliary forces working to support the Brahminical-Savarna base. It further hints at the possibility of agency on the part of a Dalit autobiographer in language. In a similar prefatory note, another Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki (2003) writes about his motivation for the self-narrative: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in an inhuman social order. And compassionless toward Dalits. I have wanted to put the narrative of my pain into writing for a long time" (p. xiii). The act of literal presentation of Dalit experiences is highly goal-oriented which has rightly been addressed by Limbale (2018): "That society may change and understand its problems – their [Dalits'] writing articulates this impatience with intensity" (p. 33). Additionally, such a focalized narrative might bolster Dalit consciousness to end the status quo as it retains a transformative power. Trivedi (2011) discusses the very purposiveness of Dalit autobiography in comparison with the non-Dalit autobiographies. In her prescriptive account she implicates what to aim at if the self-narrative is to be considered for the Dalit movement:

It is clear then that Dalit autobiographies, like the autobiographies of other socially marginalized groups, serve a very different purpose than those of celebrities or historical personalities. Their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggling against similarly experienced oppression. (p. 118)

A Dalit autobiography, as Trivedi suggests, is to exploit the narrative possibility for a collective consciousness which will in its turn reinforce the movement for liberating the marginal from the dehumanizing experiences that the Dalits are tied with on daily basis. So, a Dalit writer has to be aware of the broader scope of representational politics in writing his life narrative in which the delineation of life events has to be yoked to an end of Dalit emancipation. At this point of the writing, it seems to be urgent to contest the content of Harishankar Jaladas's autobiography and understand the narrative tendency.

A quick look at the Narrative of Nonajole Dubsantar

The narrative is delineated in twenty-six chapters. And of them, the first seven chapters of the narrative are about the author's forefathers and parents, the uncertainty in life after his grandfather's demise, his grandmother's struggle and parents' nuptial tie, and his formative age with special reference to adolescence and his peers. Needless to say, from an early time of his life his mind did not fail to appreciate what is culturally unique to his fishing community, and with the mixed feeling he serves those nuances. A sense of belonging is evident.

Chapters eight and nine report the history of communalism in pre-Independence and post-Independence Bangladesh, marginalized attitudes from the hostile literary circle, and the author's suicide thought under economic duress. Chapter ten makes an account of his motivation for a doctoral thesis, casteist attitude from the West Bengal literary society, and some of his acquaintances who impacted his personal and literary life considerably. Chapter eleven informs us of another literary figure of Bangladesh, Abu Ishaq, and the author's entrance into the Dhaka-based literary circle through the annual *Bangla Academy Mela*. Chapter twelve is dedicated to the memory of the Uttar Patenga fishing community. Chapter thirteen informs us of the minority persecution by the goons of the then ruling party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and the writer's being victimized to communal hatred and his resistance. Chapter fourteen recalls the author's memories of the puja celebration at his maternal uncle's house and offers a pragmatic discussion on the significance of puja. Except for chapter eighteen, chapter fifteen to chapter twenty-three mostly reflect on his literary life. These chapters detail the background of his books written so far. This major focus is developed along with some of the other stories of his life where the writer's modest acknowledgment for his establishment, his future literary plan, his family issues, and his sister, Tulsi's tragic death are told. In chapter nineteen the author focuses on the crisis of the Hindu society which is obsessed with caste and Varna.

Having placed his sense of belonging with the Namasudras, he dissects Manusmriti or Manu Samhita, one of the first Sanskrit texts by the egoist Brahmins and which was used by the British colonial government to formulate Hindu Law. This chapter further documents his experiences of living as marginal and untouchable. Chapter twenty-four gives us an account of the author's years of teaching in different government colleges and these

professional years unfold a chapter of hard facts, anxiety, humiliation, shame, stigma, comradeship, and commentary on some of his colleagues. Chapter twenty-five is about his students and his self-estimation as a teacher. The last chapter of the narrative is introspective, evaluative, his avowal of commitment for the fishing community through writing, and his emphatic fascination for the Bay of Bengal, on whose side he always finds comfort.

The Generic Promise as Played Out in Jaladas' Autobiography

The span of lived life and the sufferings gone through are the unifying experience for a Dalit autobiography which transforms the cumulative experience into a voice to mirror the upper caste politics of denial. Served in first person 'I', the narrative focus is the larger communal self that encounters the oppressive Brahminical-Savarna system on daily basis. The subjective position in Dalit's autobiography, as Trivedi (2011) rightly notes, is fluid and multiple. Jaladas' life narrative does not make any significant departure from the trend. Being a Dalit, the representative subjective position and the fluid nominative attain a distinctive Dalit style in Harishankar Jaladas. This will surface once we look into the eventful Dalit life of Jaladas. Jaladas (2018), in chapter ten, shares an instance of marginalization by a West Bengal literary mind Topobrato Ghosh, who addresses Harishankar Jaladas as the "smelly Bangladeshi writer" (p. 96), a deliberate injury inflicted on his original fishing community. The author in his sarcastic retort makes the vicious Hindu upper-caste politics of untouchability obvious: "No surprise that people like Topobrato Ghosh will abhor us. Because they are the followers of sage Manu! The progeny of Ballal Sen! Why on earth will they accept a writer from the so-called 'low caste'?" (p. 96). The unpalatable personal experience is served before the readers to unmask the divisive caste discourse categorizing the sneering dominant group as 'they' while the Dalit author's identity is also proudly guarded by the phrase "a writer from the so-called 'low caste.'" The construction of subjectivity and the effort to reach out to the whole community by the autobiographer are evident and the narrative does act upon the generic promise of a communal struggle against caste oppression.

The brilliance of the caste narrative is measured through its achieving a transformative power while it is narrating the life of the individual-in-focus only to invariably represent all others with a singular and similar predicament in the community. Jaladas (2018) in the self-narrative does unveil some of the casteist minds to transform the humiliation into power, reclaim the social space,

and make an occasion for exposing the moral dwarfism of the educated middle class. In one unpleasant instance, the author's sense of delicacy is questioned for his caste. On having been posted at Nilfamari Government College, the author buys a saree for the wife of his old colleague, Bimal Sushil who brazenly disparages Jaladas for his choice and associates Jaladas' taste in clothes with his caste identity to legitimize the longstanding prejudice against the Dalit that they are vulgar in taste: "you can't expect a fisherman's son to have delicacy! What a choice for a saree!" (p. 87). Even a cursory reading of the statement tells us that by erasing singularity in subjective position the 'low caste' stigma questions a Dalit's adequacy to qualify for potential integration into the larger gentry. It further stereotypes them as incapacitated by essentializing certain traits relating to taste and 'delicacy' as an entry ticket to the circle of gentry; however, the narrative reports us that the author shrewdly hits back to restore a humane approach essential to the desired functionality of society as a unit.

The stigma about the Dalit's low birth, the uncouthness, and the unsuitability multiply his survival challenges. The forced resignation from the post of the Headmaster at Dakkin Hali Shahar High School is another instance of prejudice to a fisherman. Even later in his teaching career in a government college in Chattogram the casteist fang never ceased to haunt him. So when the Head of the Department is reported to have been addressing the author unceremoniously: "Did the fisherman's son go to class? Too much is the fisherman's son these days. Came to teach instead of fishing." (Jaladas, 2018, p. 103) It is evident that the impunity for such rudeness and discourtesy toward a Dalit teacher is inbuilt in the social norms which are originally and unscrupulously propagated by the *Savarna* establishment. The shift from village to city, from fishing to teaching could not save Jaladas from humiliation since the organized system is guarding the Brahminical ethos, the sanctity of which is subject to dehumanizing the Dalits. But the reporting of Dalit plights by a Dalit autobiographer is surely an attempt to unmask the unsanitary practices of the upper caste Hindus and thereby becomes instrumental in stoking awakening for all Dalits across time and space.

The Dalit Rewriting Humiliation

Dalit self-narrative allows humiliation and pain to surface but it does so for its politics, a politics for reclaiming the social space. Author Harishankar Jaladas chooses the moments of disgrace and shame not to draw a casual sigh from the readers but rather aims at destabilizing the purported function of disgrace set

in motion by the greater casteist community exposing the state of degeneracy in such attempts to humiliate. The heated conversation with Haradhon Babu (Jaladas, 2018, p. 202) exposes the audacious and shameless aggression of the Savannas on a Dalit's private space. In the course of the conversation Haradhon Babu audaciously advises the author to change his surname 'Jaladas' for enjoying a safety net in society: "Let me tell you, Shankar Babu, affidavit your name and that will keep your children safe from all the malice in future" (p. 202). In reply to Haradhon Babu's suggestion, the author with measured theatrics silences him with a loud verbal slap:

Putting a deliberate stupidity on my face I told, "Exactly. How About Chakraborty? If I am to cheat, why not cheat of the first-rate. How's that?" Now Rakhil Dash spoke up, "No offense on our side." With a composure in my voice, I replied, "My name's Harishankar Chakraborty; father's name's Judhisthir Jaladas. Won't you people say then that I am a bastard? Shuktara Jaladas, wife of Judhisthir Jaladas bore a bastard child?" Saying it all I left Rakhil Babu's drawing-room. (p. 202)

Though Jaladas secures considerable social standing along with social mobility, his 'low caste' lineage still makes him vulnerable to the casteist Haradhon Babu, a guest to a house where the author was paying a visit on a well-wisher's request. The act of humiliation in the form of "a wider social evaluation" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 37) fails to impose "self derogation" (p. 37), a byproduct of what Tajfel and Turner call "consensual inferiority" (p. 37), on Jaladas. Instead, Jaladas' sarcastic retort serves as a symbolic challenge against the intrusive upper-caste Hindus whose audacious suggestion for compromising identity has aptly been dealt with a piece of incisive and flogging wit. By reporting and retorting, Jaladas has destabilized the politics of shaming through stereotyping and has also answered for millions of Dalits who are being exposed to such casteist humiliation on daily basis. On a critical reflection, noted critic Suhas Palshikar finds humiliation to be affirmed if the response is immediate: "[A]gency is to be found in the response to humiliation, in the choice the subject makes in the face of the humiliating act" (as cited in Kumar, 2013, p. 166). Noted academic Udaya Kumar (2013) analyses Suhas Palshikar's understanding of humiliation where Palshikar defines an act of humiliation to be half if it is not confronted by the humiliated and thereby the impossibility of agency on the part of the humiliated in the given scenario. The act of countering humiliation, an existential choice, does attest agency for a Dalit who earns it through being socially accosted. Jaladas' response to humiliation strongly vouches for his agency.

Caste Violence and the Dalit Assertion

The Head Master's proposal (Jaladas, 2018, p. 259) to a ninth-grader Jaladas for changing his surname is cultural violence on his identity, and in a critical understanding of this proposal what we observe is the working of caste hegemony being actualized by the dominant Hindu upper caste. Guru's (2012) thought about the interrelation between hegemony and license to violence is pertinent:

Space is a culturally constructed phenomenon. Structuring and restructuring of a given space is the result of a specific action carried out by a historically dominant social group, which achieves its hegemonic purposes through a regulated exercise of civilizational violence against those social groups that are victims of this kind of violence. (p. 82)

The fight for hegemony takes place primarily through cultural negotiations between the dominant and the subordinate groups in which subordination is an inevitable part to play by a group. Caste identity marker has always been a potential tool to claim the social and cultural space for the upper caste Hindus and so the divisive politics of caste marker serves as the assistive force in structuring the social space accordingly and thereby managing ascendancy. So anyone with a scheduled 'low caste' marker runs the risk of losing the advantageous position in this space. The Head Master's proposal can be equated to launching violence on identity which, to speak ideally, always frustrates fixating or reducing worth to several surnames. The certification of caste supremacy by the Hindu upper-caste denies the Dalit with the original 'low' caste marker an equal footing and thereby does not promise a life with dignity. Consequently, disintegration among the Dalits is a fact now: "Dey' turns 'Dutta'; 'Sarkar' becomes 'Sen', 'Das' becomes 'Dasgupta', 'Jaladas' becomes 'Sengupta' and 'Shil' becomes 'Shushil' (Jaladas, 2018, p. 78). Such a trend is very much aligned with the proposal of Haradhon Babu and the Headmaster who are voicing only the dominant discourse in caste narrative namely, the Dalit's identity must be compromised to be acknowledged as full human entitled to living a relatively undisturbed life. This complex psychology reveals an insane casteist mind where the desperation is being made for faking social grace. But Jaladas seizes the occasion to form a critical understanding of caste oppression and challenge the status quo. His reply to the Head Master, "Sir, I won't take peacock's feather. I will consider my life to be a success if my crow voice ever produces peacock's sound" (Jaladas, 2018, p. 259) is

restorative in Dalit identity politics. Far from being a self-exalting voice, the author leaves a note for his fellow marginal people to feel sufficient with their Dalit identity. The author's conscious choice to keep his original surname can be considered to be a potential breakthrough for his fellow Dalit people. His journey in life does testify to his confidence and conviction in himself. So, the note of hope prevails: "I hope in this low-esteemed fishing quarter there will be one who will not feel inglorious for having been born in such a family and will write to represent the culture and philosophy of the fishing community to other communities" (Jaladas, 218, p. 259). The endnote sufficiently hints that the assertion through acknowledging one's origin and nurturing the cultural resources can effectively boost community self.

Conclusion

Language can assure restitution forging a new space within the socio-cultural one and the Dalit autobiographers rewrite the space with experiential authenticity. The Dalit writings have been understood as infinitely potential for its transformative power and author Harishankar Jaladas must have been in full cognizance of this possibility. Since casteism has "both hierarchical and territorial characteristics" (Chowdhury, 2009, p.6), Bangladeshi Dalits may not be alike to the Indian counterpart in their Dalit experience; however, the objectives of the lasting discrimination and subjugation remain fundamentally the same everywhere. Pairing both his Dalit existence and his community consciousness to exposure of Bangladeshi Dalit life Harishankar Jaladas remains steadfast in his commitment to reinforcing the communal self through his life narrative. As for actualizing the Dalit narrative's potentialities, Jaladas dives deep into his personal life and invokes the farthest memory to articulate the Dalit moments to transform his text into a reflective space for the fellow Dalits. His account of hostilities scoops up certain politics at play either in collaboration with or in opposition to the long-standing caste system. His representational narrative further capitalizes on his community culture and projects his agenda namely, to voice for his commitment to Dalit reality. Jaladas is alive to the potentiality of literary projection of the common marginalized experiences and thereby to the chance in forwarding a counterculture before the culturally-aggressive Brahminical establishment. This explains why Jaladas' autobiography *Nonajole Dubsantar* can be celebrated as a text to trigger a strong sense of communal fraternity reinforcing Dalit assertion and also as a site to reconfigure the intercaste relations.

Notes

The corresponding parts of the autobiography, *Nonajole Dubsantar*, and the single piece of a quote from the other text, *Nijer Sange Dekha* were translated by the author of this article since no translation for those two texts is available.

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