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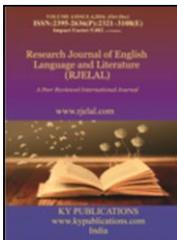
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**Voices of a Subaltern Diaspora: A Reading of Manohar Mouli Biswas'
*Surviving in My World***

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ABSTRACT

Subaltern Studies and Diaspora are two important emerging areas within the field of English Studies. In certain rare instances Subaltern studies and diasporic literature intersects. Manohar Mouli Biswas' *Surviving in My World* is one such text that has subaltern elements as well as diasporic instances. The author is a Dalit who has migrated from East Pakistan to India. His experiences are a mixture of those of a subaltern and diaspora. His caste results in his subalternity. His migration from East Pakistan to India makes him a diaspora. This paper focuses on highlighting these two issues as portrayed in the text. Further the paper attempts to find common grounds between diasporic existence and subaltern survival.

Key words : Subaltern, Dalit Autobiography, Diaspora, Bengali Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Subalternity and Diasporic experience are two important elements in Post colonial Literature. However, it is rare to have both these elements co-existing in a text. Manohar Mouli Biswas' *Surviving in my World* is such a text that encompasses subaltern elements and diasporic experiences.

Manohar Mouli Biswas was born in Namashudra caste in East Bengal. During Partition, he and his family had to move from East Bengal (which was part of Pakistan then and Bangladesh now) to West Bengal in India. These experiences form the major part of his autobiography. R. Azhakarasan says "Manohar Mouli Biswas' autobiography is significant not merely in expanding the dalit canon but in locating the biased vision of the seemingly secular Bengal mainstream".

DISCUSSION

Biswas begins his autobiography with the words of his father, "The children must get educated" (i). This shows his view that education

will literate people from clutches of social evils. Biswas grandfather echoes Biswas' father's opinion. His words are "I do not know how to read and write. I could not make you all literate, but does it mean that even your children will remain as mukku, illiterate as this old man?" (2)

In the hamlet where Biswas was born, there was only a very rudimentary school that was run in a cowshed, when cows went out for grazing. Only later a proper resemblance of a school was established. Once he joined the school, Biswas had loose the dialect of his language. Biswas recounts "After we had stepped into school, hearing us speak, Amulya Master said, 'Forget the language you learned in the womb. The faster you can forget the faster you can learn the language of the books. The path of education will become smooth". (3)

From these narrations, it is evident to the readers that Biswas' father is a visionary and his grandfather is a greater visionary. But Biswas' school life was not very easy. He had to work hard

in the fields even during the school days. Biswas says "I had to help Baba and Jetha on the land to such an extent that I could not concentrate on my studies" (6).

Biswas dearly remembers a couple of incidents from his school days. One of the incidents is related to preparing for a scholarship examination. Biswas narrates the incident in his own words as follows :

Let me speak of another incident that occurred. I was then preparing for my scholarship examination in the fifth standard. Jetha did not know what a scholarship exam was. Before going to the fields in the morning Jetha ordered, "There is no fish at home. Carry the fishing net, a bamboo bucket- the chechni-and the dhama-a big basket-and be present near the chechni fishing boat in the afternoon". I was a little irritated with Jetha's order, wondering, don't they value education at all? I revolted mentally. I won't listen to Jetha's orders! I was trying to solve an arithmetic sum of the sixth or seventh standard in the afternoon. Jetha returned home to see that I was not reading, but writing something. Seeing this Jetha burst out in anger. He shouted at me, 'Who in your lineage ever became a pandit? I'll teach you a lesson for trying to become one!' Shouting these words, he raised a bamboo staff to hit me. (7,8)

This incident, especially the words "Who in your lineage ever become a pundit? I'll teach you a lesson for trying to become one!" (8) shows the attitude of his own uncle towards education. Thus Biswas had to face challenges from his own family members and from the oppressive force from the society. In spite of all these hardship Biswas successfully cleared the scholarship examination (6).

It was headmaster and teachers like him who encouraged first generation learners like Biswas to study. However, there were teachers who practiced suitable forms of untouchability. There was a teacher named Roychowdry. Roychowdry was appointed because he had a B.A, which was essential to get government accreditation to the school. However, Roychowdry, a Kayastha by caste employed a boy belonging to his own caste as an

office attendant. This showcased Roychowdry's casteism. (22)

It was very difficult for the students during rainy season the entire village would be flooded and they had to depend upon boats to reach the school. Biswas says:

The custom of wearing shoes was not yet prevalent. We walked barefoot to school. The condition was the same, be it sun or rain. Since we did not have umbrella's at home, its necessity never played in our minds. The years in which there would be heavy rain and the paths got submerged in water, we used to go to school climbing on boats like a donga or shalti, made by cutting a betel nut tree. (24)

If rainy season brought such troubles then lack of rain brought other casualties. If there were no rains, famines ". . . descended upon the people of Kaki and Chitra riverbanks. There was not a bit of rice in anyone's home. Almost everyone started spending their day in starvations" (24)

Once Biswas matriculated and started to attend the college, he had to face more economical challenges. Biswas says "Now I had to arrange to buy my books, pay college fees, monthly hostel fees – tough time, loomed over my head" (25).

Biswas worked hard to ensure his place as a class topper. Biswas lists his hard work as follows:

Every year during annual examinations, a great stress weighed down on me because I usually stood first in the class. This stress was generated due to the sole struggle for holding onto my position. Throughout the year I used to stay up late at night and study. I never limited myself to the books of the classroom. Everything of the world was unknown to me then. The innumerable things to be known of this unknown world raced behind me, almost touching me. I read and completed whatever book I could get hold of. Learning beforehand from the solved examples of the maths book, I worked out maths problems. Taking private tuition was not prevalent then. (26)

Biswas strongly disagrees Namshudras being clutched with Hindus. He says that Hindus, especially upper caste Hindus never considered Namashudras as brothers. In the yesteryears, some

Namashudras used to ferry boats from the village. Most of the upper caste Hindus preferred not to travel on their boats. Instead the preferred to travel on the boats run by Muslims. The caste feeling over rode religious faiths. Biswas says:

If on the same spot there were the boats of the Muslims and shudras, the higher caste Hindus usually avoided the latter. They preferred to board a Muslim's boat. I was unfortunate to learn this from some people during my childhood. Later in life the question of doubting this story never occurred to me. It was endorsed by experience. How would I explain this issue of keeping our people outside the boundaries of intimacy in the Hindu consciousness? (56)

Along with describing his subaltern conditions, Biswas narrates his diasporic experiences too. The Namashudras originally did not want to migrate to India during partition. However due to economical reason and to get out of the personal griefs, Biswas migrated to India. In India, he had to face number of troubles. He says

Much of this there was no paisa in my pocket. No food to eat, no shelter to sleep in, no kith or kin to look after me. A vagabond and a hundred percent vagabond refugee in India. I was forced under the critical pecuniary condition to travel in trains without a ticket. Sometimes the ticket checker, on hearing about my pecuniary condition, was kind enough to let me proceed on my journey; sometimes I was thrown out at some unknown station at midnight. I do remember one day I had no other way to satisfy my hunger but to approach an unknown person's house for some food. (93)

If the upper caste Hindus are not ready to accept them into the mainstream, then why do they stamp Namashudras as Hindus? Biswas moots over this question and gives his verdict. He remarks.

Sometimes, or rather frequently, I felt there would remain a gap somewhere in accepting us genuinely as 'Hindus' and letting us develop on a par with the more advanced caste groups of the Hindus. We were only used in the head count for

making Hindus the majority. Socially, economically, culturally and educationally, we were a massive heap of garbage at the bottom. Human communities are a matter of national resource. But we failed to transform ourselves into resources. We remained a waste. The way this question disturbed me in my childhood still hurts in many forms. When I witnessed as a child how people were victims of discrimination even in their attempt to become boatmen it left a wound within. (56)

Biswas also brings out an alternative theory about the partition of India and Pakistan. He refuses the general belief that the partition was based on religious beliefs. Biswas argues that the partition was the result of vested interest of a few rich people. He says: ". . . it was not religion, but poverty that was swinging like a sword on top our heads. Those who had demanded partition of the nation of the basis of religion were only a handful. None of them was poor. They were successful in using religion blindly for their selfish interest"(80).

Biswas says that religious were made hand maids to partisan politicians. He beautifully states. ". . .the body of something pure and holy as religion, which beautifies humans from within, has been smeared with dirt" (80).

Biswas points out that the Namashudras might have been illiterate, but they were never intolerant. They never acted without conscience or wisdom. He gives the following words spoken by an elderly Namashudra as an illustration:

'Even though we the namashudras and the Muslims fight among each other over work, we live in the same place, work on the same fields, market from the same haat. We do not look down upon each other; we do not hate each other. We have never imagined that the country will be divided on the basis of religion, nor have we said anything like that'. (83)

On the other hand, the Namashudras were aware of the differences between them and the high caste Hindus. The Namashudras were well aware that they will not be treated in par with caste Hindus. The Namashudras used to ask.

Hindus of the Bhairab banks and we who dwell on the banks of the Kali, we too are Hindus-the same Hindus. Then why do we want to live by feeding on others' leftovers, depending on the grace of others? Why are we not thinking of becoming equals? (83)

Thus the Namashudras were able to think beyond religious differences. They were not hostile to the muslims. On the other hand they were not ready to tolerate the abuse against them as the abuses were also from their religion. One of the elders in the Namashudra bravely proclaims:

'We who live on shapla and shaluk flowers of the fields, plucking them from our donga, whether we are Hindus or Muslims, we are the same-there were no divisions among our forefathers. We are one, and staying united we will dwell in this country. No one will able to separate us'. (84)

Conclusion

Thus Subalternity and diasporic condition had doubly marginalized. Eventhough that double marginalization was a excruciating experience, Biswas has successfully turned that experience into a autobiography that triggers empathy in readers. While discussing Marginality, Jeremy Hawthorne says

Literary Criticism has focused a certain amount of attention which Authors from the earlier part of the twentieth century occupying marginal in ambiguous positions vis-à-vis social or national identity were often able to see beyond the accepted or conventional attitudes and beliefs of their time as their marginality made it difficult for them to be – of – feel – fully incorporated in any dominant system of values (196)

This observation is completely true in the case of Biswas. In his autobiography , Biswas presents things in a perspective that is far different from the mainstream. This observation about partition is an example. Hence it can be concluded that Biswas' Marginality, that originated from his subaltern and diasporic status led to a rich portrayal of an alternative history.

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