



Memory, Margins, and Moral Witness: A Testimonial Reading of Biswas's Dalit Autobiography

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ABSTRACT

Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal by Manohar Mouli Biswas is read in this paper as an example of Dalit testimonio, which transforms personal memory into a moral witnessing. Instead of reading the text as an autobiographical narrative of suffering, the study will contend that the narrative by Biswas serves the purpose of an ethical intervention into the normalization of violence based on caste in the day to day life. His memories of growing up, his social estrangement, his poverty are his political memories that can not be destroyed and that questions the history of the dominant caste in the postcolonial Bengal. The autobiography prefigures the margins of social and cultural spaces where silence and humiliation are felt as real and thus forming a counter-narrative which is based on experiential truth. Through the interpretation of the testimonial discourse, the paper throws its light on the Dalit self which is a witness to whose voice has a shared meaning but not to just one person. The story by Biswas shifts personal suffering into a civic document claiming authority, self-determination, and history. The text places moral responsibility on the society by placing memory as a means of resistance and re-defining Dalit life writing as a form of active social critique. The paper concludes that *Surviving in My World* widens the field of testimonial literature in India through the association of memory, marginality, and ethical witnessing to the concept of Dalit assertion.

1. Introduction



Manohar Mouli Biswas plays an important role in Dalit literature, especially in the literature of Bangali Dalit. His literary works have been very important in expressing the experiences of the Dalits that were previously marginalised in the mainstream culture of Bengali literature. The autobiography by Biswas, *Aamar Bhuvone Ami Benche Thaki* (2013) in Bangali language and translated under the titles *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* (2015) by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi is a significant work that captures the real life experiences of caste discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion in Bengal. More than an account of personal life, the autobiography provides a community account of Dalit life in the circumstance of structural disparities and daily humiliations.

The paper aims at revisiting the autobiography by Biswas in the conceptual framework of testimonio. Reading *Surviving in My World* as a testimonial narrative, the research transcends the traditional interpretations of autobiography and predetermines the role of the text as an act of witnessing. This narrative does not only tell the personal story but also represents a group that had historically not been given the space thus converting memory into a political and moral act against caste oppression.

2. Testimonio Autobiography.

Testimonio is an important literary genre, which appeared in Latin American literature as a form of description of collective past of oppression in the first person. One of the earliest definitions of the genre was given by John Beverley in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004), where he defined the term testimonio as a novel/novella-length first-person text, where the narrator is the actual protagonist/witness of the story being told, and where a unit of the narration is typically a life or a life-altering experience (Beverley 3031). Beverley also helps in explaining that the Spanish word testimonio is literally linked with witness bearing in a legal or religious context (Beverley 32). Testimonio is situated at the periphery of literature and preempts the marginalized voices of those not yet accommodated within mainstream cultural and historical discourses, as opposed to canonical forms of literature.

The testimonial mode focuses on the representation of the voiceless and breaks the rules of elite literature. In this respect, we can refer especially to the thoughts of Jacques Derrida about testimony. Derrida, in his *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (2000), claims that the testimony is autobiographical, each testimony is a first person account of what the witness alone has lived, seen, and experienced. Meanwhile, testimony has a legal and ethical responsibility of telling the truth, which conventionally does not allow fiction and aesthetic embellishment (Derrida 43). This conflict between experience and truth-claim points to the ethical power of testimonial discourse.



The genre of testimonio even though it was created in the Latin American socio-political settings, has been fruitfully applied to Dalit life writing by scholars like Sharmila Rege. Rege argues in the book, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women Testimonios* (2006) that Dalit autobiographical narratives deliberately act out of the conventions of bourgeois autobiography to constitute testimonies to reclaim repressed histories of caste domination. These stories evoke the truths on poverty, humiliation, and exclusion, especially during the pre-Ambedkarite times, as Rege argues (Rege 13). According to her, the main aim of testimonio is not literary elegance but a conveyance of group pain, rebellion and conflict (Rege 13).

In that perspective, *Surviving in My World* by Biswas can be interpreted as a Dalit testimonio, which shifts the memory of the individual to the memory of the collective witnessing. The author has captured not just personal experiences but also the commonality of Dalit life in Bengal in the autobiography, thus making the argument that the story is a moral and political act of testimony against the injustice based on caste.

3. Dalit Aesthetic Frameworks

The analysis of Dalit literature demands a different aesthetic system other than classical or dominant literary systems. According to Sharankumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), Dalit writing expresses the realities of caste oppression in a distinct aesthetic that is based on experience as opposed to the ornamentation. Limbale says that the Dalit literature creatively displays the plight, pain, servitude, humiliation, mockery and poverty of the Dalits, and that he considers it a deep image of grief (Limbale 30). This aesthetic is not romanticism of suffering but it demonstrates the ugly realities of the social reality in an experiential way. Limbale also asserts that Dalit literature can only be raised out of Dalit consciousness and thus it is morally and experientially beyond the reach of writers who are not victims of the experience of caste oppression.

This is affirmed by Manohar Mouli Biswas in *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature: Aesthetic, Theory and Movements* (2017) in which he dismisses the classical, Sanskritised literary theories as being insufficient in the interpretation of Dalit texts. Biswas believes that Dalit literature is not and cannot be subject to the accepted rules of rhetorical and formal norms as its aesthetic basis is based on reality and not the stylistic enrichment. According to him, beauty is truth and reality and therefore, he says that the social reality of the life of Dalits, painful though it is, has its own aesthetical values (Biswas 52). The realism of experience, which is based on the conditions of daily social life, therefore, becomes the main indicator of Dalit literary value. It is this dedication to the truth, lived reality and Dalit consciousness that



gives Dalit autobiographical narratives their testimonial nature, that makes them very much part of the ethos of testimonio.

4. The History of Bangali Dalit writing.

The argument that the literature of the Bangla Dalits is new forgets that there is a longer history of Dalit consciousness in Bengal. It has its origin in the socio-religious reforms of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur that sparked in the middle of the nineteenth century. Such movements gave a voice to the marginalised groups to challenge caste hierarchies and demand social respect. Nevertheless, despite these initial attempts, caste discrimination continued, which was supported by the Savarna domination and which was supported under the influence of religious myths and Dharmashastric interpretations that justified social ostracism. The denial of human rights and dignity of the Dalits was still the hallmark of the Bengali society which was usually disguised under the pretext of social progressiveness.

These reform movements were a start of change but Dalit literature in Bengal as a corpus of literature emerged much later. The Dalit voices began to be gradually expressed in Post-Independence Bengal, and this was mostly through autobiographies and memoirs. The stories are not only the histories of individual trauma but of histories of deprivation, exclusion and opposition that were shared. Notably, Dalit literature is not simply a recording of misery, it is a critique of the denial of education, means of living, and social respect in the system and personal narrative is an act of social and political struggle. According to Limbale, Dalit consciousness itself represents a kind of revolutionary mentality, which is tied to their struggle (Limbale 32), a spirit, which is the basis of Dalit literary expression.

Bangla Dalit writing came out quite late as compared to the Marathi Dalit literature. According to Manoranjan Byapari, in his essay *Is There a Dalit Writing in Bangla*, Dalit literature in West Bengal started almost twenty years after its growth in Maharashtra (Byapari 4117). He puts some part of this delay on the trauma of Partition and the then difficulties of displacement and reestablishment. One of the critical events in the Dalit literary movement in Bengal was the tragic death of a Lodha Shabar Adivasi student of Vidyasagar University by the name Chuni Kotal when he committed suicide in 1992 after experiencing long-term caste-based oppression. This event spurred Dalit authors and activists into a conglomeration of Dalit literary and political movement in Bengal.

Over the last few decades the literature of Bangla Dalit has been remarkable especially in autobiographic literature. The works by Manoranjan Sarkar, *Ekjon Daliter Atmakatha* (2000), Jatin Bala, *Shikor Chhera Jiban* (2010), Manoranjan Byapari, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (2012), Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Aamar*



Bhuvone Ami Benche Thaki (2013), Jagabandhu Biswas, *Smritir Pata Theke* (2014), and Kalyani Thakur Charal, *Ami Ken* These autobiographies reveal unending realities of caste discrimination in Bengal and the existing myth of the bhadralok that caste is irrelevant in Bengali society. This literature, as aptly observed by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in the foreword to the autobiography of Biswas, is a burst to the popular myth of the bhadralok that caste does not matter in Bengal (Biswas xi).

5. Memory as Political Archive

In Surviving in My World, memory is not only a personal memory of the past but it is a political archive that contains experiences that have been systematically repressed in official histories and powerful social narratives. The autobiographical memory of Biswas opposes the silence of Dalit histories by the institutions by documenting the daily lives of hunger, humiliation, and caste segregation which often do not enter into state-sponsored or elite historiography. This does not happen because these memories do not come out as isolated anecdotes, but they show what we can term as the structural logic by which caste functions as an organising principle of social life. It is revealed that deprivation in the text is not an accident or individual phenomenon but socially constructed, nurtured with any degree of practices of exclusion, neglect and denial.

Biswas is constantly reminded of childhood experiences when food, education and social space were mediated by caste location. Such memories predetermine the formation of Dalit childhood, when the inferiority is imposed on an individual at an early period, even before consciousness of any political orientation has the opportunity to form. Biswas uses memory as testimony by recounting the experiences of being refused access to specific places, being mocked, or regarded as something inherently dirty. These recalled incidents are material of caste violence and turn the individual history into a group history. In this regard, memory can be seen as a way of resistance to forgetting, confronting the mainstream discourse that makes the caste discrimination a pre-modern or colonial history. The autobiography, instead, demands continuity of caste oppression in postcolonial Bengal by revealing how caste oppression continues despite any legal prohibitions.

6. Margins, Lived Reality, Everyday Violence.

The marginal spaces in *Surviving in My World*, including the poor neighborhoods, the segregated schools, and the socially aggressive places, are the key locations where the caste power is reproduced and internalised. These spaces do not remain just the backgrounds of the narration but are also part and parcel of developing the subject of Dalit. Biswas introduces childhood as being a matter of constant bargaining



with indignity, in which indignity is something to be threatened not only but to survive requires emotional strength. Raised in this way he says, is like education in exclusion, in which even the most mundane encounters are tinged with caste consciousness.

What the autobiography has brought out strongly is how caste functions via everyday violence- violence which is both subtle, normalised and oftentimes made invisible. Insults, avoidance gestures, different treatment at schools, and social indifference all are a regime of humiliation which does not necessarily show physical brutality but leaves psychological traumas. Such everyday activities follicularise inequality and place discrimination as normal and definite. Through recording these instances, Biswas brings out the way caste violence operates precisely in its mundane, making it part of daily life and social behaviour.

This story therefore reinvents the concept of marginality but not as a passive identity but as an experience of living and struggling. In this respect, survival is a kind of protest and even narration is the political assertion. By the actual catalogue of these peripheral experiences, *Surviving in My World* questions the ethical complacency of the mainstream world and makes one take a stand and face the structurality of caste oppression. The autobiography is thus not simply an account of life at the margins; but it recaptures the margins as domains of truth, testifying, ethical witnessing.

7. Out of the Suffering Subject to the Moral Witness.

The attempt to avoid sticking to the victimhood paradigm can be seen as one of the most drastic looks of *Surviving in My World*. Although Biswas does not water down or romanticize the suffering of caste oppression, he is protesting against the Dalit subject being reduced to a passive victim. Rather, the story strongly predicts survival, contemplative introspection, and moral insightfulness so that the Dalit self may become a pro-active ethical agent. This change of suffering subject to witnessing subject is an important political gesture in that it reinstates narrative control to forms that have long spoken about Dalits instead of talking with them.

His writing, in its turn, is a kind of political intervention by Biswas. Individually recounting his life within the experienced realities of caste, he alters silence into a mode of speech and invisibility into visibility. Memory is an ethical act through which injustice is called and maintained defiance against the loss of memory. In this regard, remembering is not a personal practice but a group task and narration becomes a way of repositivizing power over the past. The autobiography drives home on countless occasions that caste is not an unrealistic ideology or a problem miles ahead but a daily moral failure that



is performed by the everyday interactions. Through these failures, Biswas provokes the readers to think about the moral aspect of social complicity and indifference.

Conclusion

The paper has stated that *Surviving in My World: Growing up Dalit in Bengal* can be fruitfully interpreted as a kind of Dalit testimonio, whereby memory, marginality and moral witnessing converge to create a strong counter-narration of dominant histories. The autobiography revolves around the personal memory of Biswas into the collective witnessing to the experiences lived that attempt to disrupt institutional oblivion and cultural denial. The text, using its testimonial mode, shows how caste oppression still prevails in postcolonial Bengal and calls upon the rest of society to be ethically responsible.

The Dalit subject is defined as a moral witness and not a victim, by placing the autobiography in its proper perspective, thus redefining life writing as a form of resistance and an intervention in history. It stipulates the validity of experiential truth and promises the political possibilities of memory as a critique and repossession. Finally, the work of Biswas is enhancing the boundaries of the testimonial literature in the Indian context and shows that Dalit life writing can also serve as an ethical appeal to the justice, credence, and social change.

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