

# Exploring the Agony of the 'Other': A Critical Study of Selected Dalit Short Stories from Bengal

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## Abstract

In this male-dominated society, the social hierarchy has not accepted a woman as a human being with free will to do or decide anything. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir exposes how this society considers a woman as the 'Other' of man. The position of the marginalized women of colour, caste and race is worst. Dalit women being doubly subjugated have to be humiliated in the hands of the upper caste male, elite women and the male members of their caste because of their gender as well as their caste position. I intend to examine the Dalit short stories from Bengal like "Conflict" and "Discrimination" by Manju Bala and "Dhani Bauri Gets 'Salvation'" by Sunil Kumar Das to understand the real position of Dalit women in this patriarchal caste-dominated Indian society, specifically in Bengal. This paper aims to explore the experiences and the agony of Dalit women as the 'other' among 'Others' with special reference to these mentioned short stories.

**Keywords:** Caste; Dalit women; Double subjugation; Gender; Other.

"If the Mahar community is the "other" for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the "other" for the Mahar men" (Pandit xv). What Maya Pandit in "Translator's Introduction" of *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble speaks about the Dalit Mahar women, is true to every Dalit woman in India under the exploitation of both caste-system as well as patriarchal discrimination. Dalit women because of their lower caste as well as their gender position are subjugated in this caste-based patriarchal society as the 'other' among 'Others'. Dalit people as the outcaste or atishudra in Indian society are treated as the 'other' by the upper caste people. At the same time, as Beauvoir also asserts about the secondary position of women in

*The Second Sex*, in this patriarchal society woman is treated as the 'Other' of man. In this perspective, Dalit women as Dalit and as woman are doubly oppressed in this man-centred caste-based society. Dalit male writers as well as Dalit women through their literary works in the contemporary time are strongly vocal to represent the humiliations what Dalit women have to face every moment in their day-to-day life and also to awaken this society to be conscious to break this politics of caste and gender hierarchy in Indian society. In the present scenario of Dalit Studies in India, we are much accustomed with the South Indian Dalit writings and their sociological context to understand the real position of the Dalit, specifically Dalit women in our society. At the same time, the situation of Dalit women in different other parts of India should be brought to the forefront to make this society conscious and careful about this discrimination and inhuman treatment towards Dalit women all over in India. In this perspective, this paper is a humble attempt to explore the disgraces and subjugations what the Dalit women in Bengal have to surpass in their everyday struggle for survival and self-respect with reference to the select Bengali short stories by Dalit writers like Manju Bala's "Conflict" and "Discrimination" and Sunil Kumar Das' "Dhani Bauri Gets 'Salvation'".

In this patriarchal society, the concept of the 'Other' is significant to denote the relation between men and women. In this society, where patriarchal ideology is the primary means to decide the position of male and female, a woman is not given the status of a person with free will, rather as man's 'Other'. Onbelet writes, "... otherness is defined by difference, typically difference marked by outward signs like race and gender. As such, otherness has also been associated predominantly with marginalized people, those who by virtue of their difference from the dominant group, have been disempowered, robbed of a voice in the social, religious, and political world" (Onbelet). As the 'Other' belongs to the dominated group, as their voice is not listened in this society, they are robbed of their identity. Husserl from the perspective of phenomenology considers that the experience of the 'other' is emerged not merely as an object rather as a subject because of the empathy what one feels in terms of his/her embodiment.

Husserl suggests that the existence of the 'other' can be developed cognitively as an alter-ego. Heidegger as a student of Husserl was much familiar with the modern philosophy of subjectivity and its cognitive as well as practical aspects. He opines that in every inter-subjective situation an encounter of will is involved to create the idea of self and 'other'. According to him, this encounter constitutes the field of existential tension. (Dallmayr 21) But Levinas claims that the 'Other' is "infinitely transcendent,

infinitely foreign" – one's relation to him is that of infinity. He also views that "the 'alterity,' or 'otherness, of the Other', as signified by the 'face,' is something that one acknowledges before using reason to form judgments or beliefs about him" (Wolin).

Hegel using the ideas of 'The Dialectic of Consciousness' and 'The Dialectic of Self-Consciousness' suggests that humans are not just conscious, but also self-conscious. In Hegel's view our self-consciousness is connected to our awareness of 'Others' (Benson). Being influenced by Freud's theory of the unconscious, Jacques Lacan refers to the dialectic of 'Self' and 'Other'. He suggests the 'little other' (French 'autre') to designate our mirror image - our counterpart, a reflection or projection of the ego, and the 'big Other' (French 'Autre') to signify the radical alterity - the concept of otherness - a separate entity. According to Lacan, "'the Other sex' - the sex defined by its ineffable and infallible jouissance - is always a feminine subject, both for masculine subjects and other feminine subjects" (Swales 225). Foucault and the Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer opine that we produce the 'Other' through our discursive constructions. The representations of the 'Other' are made in service of geopolitical power and domination. The metaphoric, metonymic and anthropomorphic constructions of the 'Other' are the manifestations of the cultural attitudes inherent to the agent of Othering.

In this patriarchal society, women's place as the 'Other' is well elaborated by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir says, "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (26). She mainly argues that there is nothing inherently natural in matter of sexual or gender distinction. She challenged the idea that women are "naturally" different from man critiquing psychoanalytic discourse of Freud to designate woman just as the damaged man as for Freud male child is the norm and woman's body is the sight of lack as she lacks male penis. She considers the designation of the woman as the 'Other' or the 'Second Sex' is no way "natural", it is social construct. She argues that "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (26). Butler going against the idea that the body, sexuality and gender are naturally connected asserts that they are socially constructed. She emphatically establishes the idea of gender 'performativity' by which she means the enactment of gender role from father to male child and from mother to female child in accordance to the social taboos and prohibitions. Because of this gender 'performativity' a male child becomes a part of the

patriarchal discourse and plays the informed gender role. We are socially obliged to appear as gendered individual right from the moment of our birth. Butler means gender as a process of doing or becoming rather than simply being.

Going to elaborate the idea of the 'Other' as critiqued by Beauvoir, Judith Thurman writes that "The black, the Jew, and the woman, she concluded, were objectified as the other in ways that were both overtly despotic and insidious, but with the same result: their particularity as human beings was reduced to a lazy, abstract cliché ("the eternal feminine"; "the black soul"; "the Jewish character") that served as a rationale for their subjugation" (Beauvoir 13-14). In the perspective of India, the situation of the Dalit or Tribal is same. In Indian society largely based on the caste or class distinction, the Dalit people are marginalized and objectified as the 'Other'. In the case of Dalit women, they are doubly marginalized because of their gender and caste. Patriarchy which is defined as the fundamental oppressive force by Kate Millett, "as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic forms, whether of caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy, just as it pervades all major religions, it also exhibits great variety in history and locale" (Whelehan 15-16).

As the feminist movement up to Second Wave was elite in nature and concerned with the problems of the upper class women, the voice of the marginalized women who have to face humiliations not only because of their gender, but also because of their racial discrimination, colour, caste, class etc. was unheard. The black feminist bell hooks describing "the term 'woman' is synonymous with 'white women'", asserts that "women of other races are always perceived as others, as de-humanized beings who do not fall under the heading woman" (Whelehan 108-110). What hooks considers about the predicament of black women is very much true in the case of Dalit women in India. Gopal Guru opines that to understand the real place of Dalit women in Indian society, we have to understand "the specificity of dalit women's subjugation, characterized by their experience of two distinct patriarchal structures/situations: a brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of their women" (Guru 2548-2549). Spivak points out that "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced ... If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow ... The woman is doubly in shadow"

(82-83). Dalit feminism well addresses this doubly oppressed position of the Dalit women asserting the crisis of the Dalit women because of their gender position as well as of their lower caste. Dalit women have to face humiliations by the people both male and female of upper caste of the society; at the same time they are treated as objects under the patriarchal structure of their own society.

In this context, I would like to explore how in Indian perspective caste and gender are knotted together in the subjugation of the Dalit women, specifically in Bengal. My paper is also an attempt to understand better the position of Dalit women, the humiliations they have to face at every moment of their life, the problem of their education, the question of inter-caste marriage, the ill-treatments what they undergo after their marriage with special reference to the selected Bangla short stories by Dalit writers. With the critical analysis of the portrayal of Dalit women in the selected Bengali short stories, my conclusion will highlight the place of Dalit women in this society as the 'other' of 'Others'.

Many Dalit women writers from different corners of India come to the forefront to make the real position and subjugations of Dalit women visible and to raise their voice to abolish the caste and gender-based oppressions over them. Bama Faustina, Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Sujata Gidla, Gogu Shyamala, P. Sivakami are few well-known names as Dalit feminist writers from India. In Bengal, there are also few names like Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manju Bala, Chuni Kotal to be the Dalit feminist writers to reveal the oppressed state and predicament of the Dalit women in this society. Manju Bala, a well-known Dalit writer from Bengal, through her different short stories well portrays the doubly oppressed position of the Dalit women. Her short story, "Conflict" shows how a woman has to surrender all her dreams as well as finally even her life because of her inter-caste marriage in an upper caste family.

Kalyan Kanjilal, a doctor by profession, fell in love of Banani Mandal, a colony girl and finally married her promising to give all kinds of support in any situation in their married life. But within few days, Banani became experienced about her position in that Kanjilal family when she was warned to stop singing by her mother-in-law, Renuka Devi: "Banani had sat with the harmonium that morning. She was just about to start singing when a harsh voice rang in her ears. 'Stop right there, will you? You low-born girl, no singing here! It is not the tradition of the Kanjilal family to have its women break into song like that! You have to maintain certain decorum here.'" (15). Not only mother-in-law but her husband

also supported his mother in this regard: "Do you want to continue your singing lessons, Banani? But since mother doesn't approve of it, it's better you give up singing..." (15). The place of a lower caste woman in a higher caste family shows the predicament of every Dalit woman in this society well. Banani's caste becomes the main reason behind her mother-in-law's command to stop singing, whereas Banani's gender opens her husband's path to order her to follow his mother's words. This is the discourse of caste and gender in Indian society to make Dalit women dumb and voiceless. To keep a woman muted no husband supports his wife's higher education. This is a naked truth of this patriarchal society. Banani's husband was not an exception. He ordered her "you don't really need to continue with your M.A. ..." (15). He also advised her that "You have studied quite a lot. Why don't you concentrate on the household from now on? You don't have to take up a job." (15-16).

Though Banani became shocked listening these words from the mouth of her husband who before marriage had promised something else, this is not a new occurrence before a wife in this world of patriarchy where no woman's will is valued or entertained. Beauvoir correctly asserts that "... she is nothing other than what man decides..." (Beauvoir 26). Obviously Banani's life denotes a woman just as a decision of man without any self to decide. Education or job, the gate-way to give woman independence cannot be supported in this patriarchal society, specifically after marriage. Christine Delphy explains marriage as "a labour contract that ties women to unpaid domestic labour, commonly trivialized as "housework,"..." (Tyson 97-98). Banani was directed to engage with household works instead of her study, just like an 'unpaid domestic labour'. She is woman. So she must not have any dream of her own. This society does not prefer this. Kamala Das in her poem, "An Introduction" well traces this face of this society - how the man-made rules and customs restrict women in this patriarchal society:

Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers. (35-38)

This is unfortunate but undeniable. Every woman is the prey of this man-made hegemony. A Dalit woman as a woman has to bear all these under the forces of patriarchal hierarchies. Being Dalit she has to face much more than this. Banani had to listen from her mother-in-law "You low-born girl, no singing here" (15). She was not permitted to perform "any of

the chores" of her family as well (16). Low-birth is not a sin of Banani or any Dalit woman; this division of caste is man-made politics. But still every Dalit woman has to digest such words in the way of their life as Uma Chakravarti points out that caste ideology makes "the upper caste practices hegemonic" and limits "the cultural imagination of the lower castes" (Rege 26). Because of this hegemonic structure of this society Banani had to be forced to stop dreaming about her own life as she belonged to lower-caste. Not only had that she finally had to surrender her life under the inhuman brutality of this caste hierarchy. Banani was then bitten and tortured as she was unable to stay away from singing. She thought these as the "tokens" of her husband's love: "... my whole body is marked with scars, black, blotchy and innumerable. They are tokens of my husband's love, my mother-in-law's care for me" (16). This kind of love or care is the only gift of this society for a Dalit woman. The caste-gender negotiation finally snatches away the life of Banani. She was burnt alive though it was announced as the stove-explosion as the reason of her death. Rege remarks that "The nationalist invocation of Vedic civilization challenged the supremacy of colonisers but carried a hierarchisation of different social groups along the complex and intersecting axes of caste and gender" (Rege 32).

Another story from the pen of Manju Bala, "Discrimination" well exposes the prevailed discriminations of this society based on caste and gender. Through the portrayal of Fuliya Sardar's life as a lower caste woman, Manju Bala shows the humiliations what a lower caste woman has to face at the time of her education as well as after her marriage. As Fuliya belonged to Santhal caste, she had to sit at the last bench even if she arrived earlier and she had to endure quite often "loathing, scorn and ridicule ... because of her birth" (27). She was always condemned with the questions like "Education, is it meant for you all? Couldn't ferrying bricks fetch you some rice?" (27). This is the truth of this society where human value completely depends on the caste-based discrimination of this society. Right to education is not a complete solution to erase the caste-based humiliations of this society or to show regard to the lower caste; rather human consciousness about the dignity of every human being irrespective of his/her caste or class or religion should be raised.

Waman Kardak, a Marathi Dalit poet, in his poem, "Send My Boy to School" asks this society "Send my boy to school / Lord and Master" (1-2) as only education can help them to establish their place and dignity erasing the discrimination of this society. But, because of their lower caste they are not given equal opportunity to be educated with their self-esteem and will. They have to live "a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance,

insults, injustice, atrocities – practices totally against humanity” (Dangle xxi). Their physical contact is considered to ‘pollute’ the upper caste people. So when Fuliya visited Bijoya’s house, Bijoya’s mother “had to work a little extra hard that day” (Bala 29) as she had to clean the staircase and the first-floor room because of Fuliya’s touch. Actually Bijoya Ganguly though belonged to higher caste, had treated Fuliya as her friend going above this narrow norm of this society. But her mother shows the common behaviour of the higher caste people towards these so called untouchables through her words to her son Jeet: “See what your sister has done! She gets hold of a Santhal, who knows from where, and comes and introduces her as her friend! She took her upstairs and made her sit on the sofa. The covers of the cushions haven’t been taken off yet. Don’t you go and sit on it now” (Bala 29). Janardan Waghmare writes, a Dalit lives on “the outskirts of the village” and his touch is said “to be polluting” (Waghmare 313). He adds, “Untouchability, created by the caste and class structure, can only be described as a peculiar institution. The Dalit has been living for centuries as a prisoner of the darkness of untouchability” (314).

Dr. Ambedkar opines that “There is a general belief that the prohibitions in the Hindu religion against intermarriage, interdining, interdrinking and social intercourse are bounds set to degrees of association with one another. But this is an incomplete idea. The prohibitions are indeed limits to degrees of association; but they have been set to show people of unequal rank of each ...” (Dangle 258-259). This discourse becomes the impulse in the mind of the Bijoya’s mother when her son Jeet said to marry Fuliya. Bijoya’s mother’s voice shows the established discrimination of this society: “‘Who, Fuliya? How is that possible? She is a Santhal girl. Even if you make friends with them, you can never marry them.’” (Bala 31). Even after marriage she did not allow Fuliya to touch the pot of rice at their house. Fuliya had to listen such abusive words like “Thread ceremony for a Santhal’s son?” (33). Such kind of humiliations Fuliya had to bear only because of her lower caste. Fuliya was not only humiliated as a woman, but also as a lower caste girl by male as well as by female from higher caste. Every Dalit woman like Fuliya has to be subjugated equally because of their gender status as well as for their caste position.

Not only by Dalit female writers, the contribution of different Dalit male writers to express and bring to the front the agony of the ‘other’ among ‘Others’, the sordid reality of the Dalit women’s life and struggle to end this curse of this society cannot be ignored. Anupama Rao mentions in her book, *Gender, Caste and the Imagination of Equality*, “Some anti-caste activists who addressed the interrelation of sexual and social reproduction were men like Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, or B. R. Ambedkar, not to men-



tion lesser-known regional figures" (Rao 2). Decentering the traditional idea of feminism, Rao also appeals to both women and men "to become feminists for the full promise of (feminist) equality to be achieved" (Rao 2). If we consider Bengali Dalit literature, obviously to portray the double marginalization of the Dalit women Dalit male's voice is undeniable. Manohar Mouli Biswas, Achintya Biswas, Sunil Kumar Das, Kapil Krishna Thakur and many more through their literary works raise their voice to indicate not only the oppressed state of the Dalit, but also to present the predicament of the Dalit women because of their caste as well as gender. In the story, "Dhani Bauri Gets 'Salvation'", Sunil Kumar Das through his depiction of the Dhani Bauri's life shows the curse over Dalit women in this Indian society. Being separated from her husband thirty-five years ago Dhani Masi had worked at Bejdih colliery and been intimated with Gopalda who used to carry goods to that colliery. As she belonged to the lower caste, at her work place she had to be humiliated at different occasions. One day when "she had been engaged in sweeping the office floor", "Ghoshalbabu, the record-keeper of the colliery ... uttered obscene words to entice Dhani Masi" (Das 148). But she had not remained silent. She started beating him up holding his collar and screamed in rage "These upper-caste people treat us as commodities. When we resist their immoral advances they blacken us by questioning our character. I'll kill such hypocrites." (148). Under the threat of male hegemony, this kind of humiliation of a woman at the work places is common. But if any woman belongs to the lower caste, the task becomes easier for the male power. As Dhani Masi belonged to the lower caste, her voice was controlled by maligning her character. Dhani Masi because of the request of Gopalda and of her much affection towards Gopalda's son Hiru agreed to stay with Gopalda's family. But when she gave only twenty rupees to her nephew Madan on her pay day, she was rebuked by Gopalda and ordered not to give money anyone without his consent.

Lois Tyson pronounces correctly that "Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (85). To Gopalda, Dhani Masi's money was only target; he had no concern at all to the self-esteem or will of her. Here he as a man thinks himself decision-maker and Masi should be submissive. Dhani Masi is like a man-made 'creature' what Beauvoir posits a woman in this male-centered society. Because of her caste position, she had also to face abusive words at Gopalda's house. One Sunday, Dhani Masi who "didn't have access to Gopalda's kitchen for her low social status" (151), was compelled to enter the kitchen to offer drinking water to Hiru's thirsty child. But Hiru's wife had abused her by

screaming that “You should have waited till my return. Now I have to wash all the utensils in my kitchen for the second time. I’ll have to discard the pitcher as well ...” (151). Dhani Masi was unable to understand whereas she had done everything for this family, yet to that family her status was same that of an untouchable. Dhani Masi became the target of both caste and gender. Gopalda reminded her gender identity, whereas Hiru’s wife her caste position. As a woman she cannot have the capability to finalise any decision without a male’s concern. At the same time, as a lower-caste woman, she cannot be permitted to touch anything of a higher-caste family as her touch will pollute non-Dalit.

Tyson remarks that “In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is *other*: she is objectified and marginalized...” (92). In these mentioned stories, Banani, Fuliya, and Dhani Masi had been treated as the ‘other’ not only because of their gender discrimination as women, but also because of their lower caste position in this society. Not only by the male figures like Kalyan or Ghoshbabu or Gopalda, but also by the women of upper caste like Renuka Devi, Bijoya’s mother or Hiru’s wife, as the women of lower caste they had to be oppressed and to remain subjugated in every domain of this society. Greer refers to “an accentuated differentiation of classes which propagates and legitimizes the oppression of the affluent, dominant class of women on their marginalized sisters” (Bhattacharya 1). Beauvoir also suggests that women also can act as the spokesperson of the patriarchal discourse and become the operators of the patriarchal hegemonic system. Renuka Devi, Bijoya’s mother and Hiru’s wife have abused Banani, Fuliya, and Dhani Masi as the dominant class to the marginalized caste women. Thus not only in the domain which is controlled completely by the patriarchal hegemony, every woman is the ‘other’, but the domain which is dominated by the matriarchy being operated by the patriarchal discourse also treats a woman as the ‘other’.

The humiliations and oppressions faced by Banani, Fuliya, and Dhani Masi show the real position and agony of the Dalit women in Indian society as the ‘other’ among ‘Others’. These stories also reflect the consequence of inter-caste marriage in this society. Banani had gone through inhuman tortures only because of her caste position at her husband’s house. Finally she was brutally killed because of her violation of her mother-in-law and husband’s commands. Fuliya was also humiliated much at her husband’s house because of the ill-treatments by her mother-in-law: “Though Mamata Devi accepted the marriage, she could not do away with her casteist prejudices. Therefore, at every step, she tried to din it into Fuliya that she belonged to a low caste” (Bala 32). Fuliya’s husband Jeet also “could not go against his mother’s wishes in the end” (Bala 33). Though inter-caste

marriage can help much this society to erase the prominent caste discrimination, it is still a dream to be untouched in reality. So, we need to be more conscious about the fact that the interrelation between caste and gender is an unavoidable threat to the Dalit women in this hierarchical structure of Indian society. Anupama Rao, in her book, *Gender and Caste*, criticizes “the importance given to Hindu ritual in defining and legitimizing marriage refusing the ban on intercaste marriage” (Rao 2).

Manju Bala through her stories “Conflict” and “Discrimination” also criticizes the established Hindu and patriarchal values and rituals breaking the social barrier in between Dalits and non-Dalits. She attempts with her utmost effort to erase completely the prevailed conflict or discrimination based on caste and gender from this society making people more conscious about this humiliations of the Dalit women and more generous and human towards the dignity of them. Sunil Kumar Das also through his presentation of Dhani Masi’s embarrassments because of her gender identity as well as her lower caste makes this curse of this society over Dalit women visible to all of us to spread anti-caste and anti-patriarchal consciousness in this society. Dhani Masi’s protest against her disgraces is actually the strong voice of every Dalit writer irrespective of their gender position to establish a new society bringing a new morning devoid of any caste or gender discrimination. Manju Bala and Sunil Kumar Das through these mentioned stories strongly assert a fact that as a social being our priority in our concerns should be to keep this society always conscious about the self-esteem and dignity of every woman irrespective of their gender, caste, religion or class position.

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