

BAHIRI-AN EFFORT TO TRACE BACK THE UNHEARD VOICE OF BANGSHI, AN OUTSIDER

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ABSTRACT

Ramapada Chowdhury adopted human psychology in his writings. In his novel Bahiri he tried to explore how the character Bangshi was treated as an outsider in the sphere of the upper-class privileged society. He had come from a low descent and that was why he was always treated like a servant. He was excluded from the society and was considered to be an outsider to the people with whom he lived. But his pursuing of studies and his wisdom were considered as a threat to the others as they thought that Bangshi had transgressed the boundary. Here the casteism could be reflected in this novel.

KEYWORDS: *Outsider, Marginalisation, Caste System, Transgression*

INTRODUCTION

Ramapada Chowdhury adopts human psychology in his oeuvre of literary works. The theme of human complexity is recurrent in his writing. After his death, *Desh*, one of the prominent literary journal has dedicated its first few pages to this writer. There it is said about the writer in the editorial column that Ramapada Chowdhury with his piercing observation of middle-class society and middle-class values tries hard to come out of these unending cobweb (Sengupta 11). In this novel *Bahiri*, the novelist probes into the complexities of relationship and in this process, an angle of casteism can be fleshed out. This article would unravel the marginalized character or bahiri, Bangshi's relation with his members of his foster father as depicted in this novel. This is an attempt to analyse why the bahiri is treated only with the pity not with the equal position of others and why his accession to the spheres of knowledge and occupation, becomes so intolerable for the others.

The title of the novel itself indicates a sense of exclusion or the marginalisation of one, and it brings out the class-caste divisions in the society. Bangshi is bahiri in the literal sense of the term as Sanjoy's parents Sudhamoy and Dayamoyi have brought him to their house. There Bangshi is reared up with Sanjoy and Jhuma, the same-aged children. Bangshi is there in the house but, as if, everybody knows that he is not like them. There is a disparity between Bangshi and the other children. Although Sanjoy's parents try to fulfil this gap, but it remains. Bangshi is bahiri in the metaphorical sense of the term as he is the person who is almost like an outsider to Sanjoy's family or the territory of the privileged Hindu class. He is a marginal figure of the society as he comes from a low descent. Bangshi is found to be begging on the street and Dayamoyi brought him with them. A line of casteism is revealed along with this idea of 'bahiri'. He is not the 'other' in the sense of the postcolonial society regarding the other in terms of the white and non-white, that is, white, the self and non-white, the other. Arun Prabha Mukherjee in her essay "First World Readers, Third World Text Some Thoughts about Theory and Pedagogy" says that the institutionalization of postcolonial theory creates problems. The theory then only looks at the situation of colonialism. It sees the native as a singular homogenized one. But it overlooks the

fractures with which the natives are divided like class, caste, race, gender etc. The canonization of postcolonial theory becomes inadequate to reveal the other dominations that are posed in effect of caste and gender (Mukherjee 3–7). Mukherjee says that the postcolonial society is not just conducted by the condition of colonialism. There are other conditions that lead to the exploitative phenomena. It has to focus on the different specificities that determine the colonial situation. In this novel, the colonialism regarding the caste is highlighted. So, the constitutive binaries of the postcolonial literature keep changing. Here in this novel, the binaries are formed in the context of caste practice in India. The binary of ‘untouchable’ and the privileged Hindu class is the central crux of the narrative. Bangshi is a street child so the child is excluded to the margins of the society. Caste is here the exploitative phenomena in this text. Kancha Ilaiah in “Why I am not a Hindu” shows that his subject constitution consists of the casteism in India. His position is not that of the colonised like is found in the postcolonial literature coloniser white and colonised non-white. But for Ilaiah, the binaries of the postcolonial change and it becomes the binary of privileged class and Dalitbahujan (Ilaiah 14). Ilaiah is saying that caste determines his subject position. Bangshi also comes from a low and unknown descent. In the text, it is said that Bangshi’s mother has sold her child to a beggar and he helps the beggar named Nulo to beg as Nulo has no hands. So Bangshi is called “*hatua*” [helping hand] (Chowdhury 316). It is Dayamoyi who names him Bangshi. The narrative of *Bahiri* is written in a format of flashback where the present aged Bangshi suddenly comes to Sanjoy’s house where he lives at a time. Sanjoy and others cannot expect him; they think that the expected may be one of their relatives (Chowdhury 305). But Bangshi’s entering into the house as a “*bahiri*” (outsider) is symbolic as his advent in their lives as someone who is not expected. Bangshi’s entrance to the room can be like a threat to their comfort zone (room), posing a threat also to their existence. This threat is evident as Sanjoy finds a presence of arrogance in Bangshi’s appearance and conversation. Sanjoy says that through Bangshi’s gestures, the sound of his boots, his outfit and his smartness, it is evident that Bangshi has been transformed completely. Sanjoy thinks that this transformation happens since a long time but he can not imagine that Bangshi can be transformed in this way. He thinks that Bangshi is now to him as nothing but an embodiment of arrogance and vanity (Chowdhury 306). In fact, his sister, Jhuma is getting irritated with Bangshi’s presence (Chowdhury 305). Sanjoy thinks that Bangshi comes there to show them off his affluence and bright prospect in future and he does not find a tint of gratefulness in Bangshi (Chowdhury 306). Having a low descent, he progresses in life and that annoys Sanjoy. He asks for gratefulness as his parents have provided Bangshi with food, shelter, and everything. And so Sanjoy demands a long-term submission from Bangshi. And if that happens, that would be of no issue. But Bangshi comes to hold a position which is equal to them and this becomes a threat to them. The narrative unfolds itself as Sanjoy recapitulates their going to a pilgrimage, their noticing of Bangshi and their bringing Bangshi along with them. When he is brought, he is condemned as a dirty, shabby boy. He is considered to be polluted. In “The Doctor and the Saint” written by Arundhati Roy, which is added to the first section of the book, *Annihilation of Caste*, she says that the top of the caste “pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties” (Roy 15). In *Bahiri*, at first Bangshi is seen contemptuously as he is the untouchable, as if, his skin pores emit pollution. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Roy also discusses how varna is based on the birth and not on the guna with the reference of “chaturvarna” system that gives birth the system of caste. She shows that outside the varnas are the avarna castes “the Ati-Shudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own—the Untouchables, the Useable, the Unapproachable” (Roy 15). Bangshi is the untouchable. Like the other untouchables he has no right to enter into the mainstream society to which the upper-Hindu class belongs. He is insignificant one as he belongs to the avarna castes. This motif is repeatedly pointed out in the novel through the incidents like he has not even a name before getting the name Bangshi, or the beggar is called the “*adhikari*”

(controller) of that unnamed boy though the beggar may not be the actual guardian of him (Chowdhury 313). Even when he is brought to the home, he is trained to become a human being and this point out that Bangshi is considered by them as not a human one according to their definition of standard human beings. But the hierarchised dichotomy still works on their minds and that is found when Sanjoy hesitates to call him as "*chakar*"(servant) but he objects to call him Madhu ,as if, the name itself is not categorised for a person like Bangshi (Chowdhury 317) Even Madhushudhan, another servant of their house imagines himself a member of high pulpit and expresses his disdain to touch Bangshi, as if, he seems to be polluting (Chowdhury 318)

But when Bangshi gets a job and overcomes his professional hurdles successfully Sanjoy finds it annoying. In the introductory section of the book *Annihilation of Caste*, Roy shows that Ambedkar writes in Gujrati journal Navajibon, "To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system" (qtd in Ambedkar:16). In the text, Brajobabu says that the upper middle-class Hindus are predestined to get a job in any kind of service whereas the intruder, Bangshi should be accustomed with any technical job. (Chowdhury 328) They should be trained in technical profession but the jobs are only the territory of the privileged Hindus. And in this sense Bangshi's accession to the sphere of the occupation may be a transgression to them. So Sanjoy cannot admit that Bangshi is doing better in his service or he is studying management (Chowdhury 306). His association with knowledge and wisdom becomes quite impossible just like it is epistemologically impossible to have Eklavya as a better archer than Arjuna. Eklavya belongs to the lower class of hunters and for this he is rejected by Dronacharyya. But when he is found practising archery, Dronacharyya understands that he is more skilful than Arjuna and as Eklavya admits Dronacharyya as his guru, so he asks for a sacrifice. He is ordered to cut his thumb and to dedicate it to his guru ("The Story of Eklavya and Dronacharya"). Actually, it is empirically impossible to accept a sudra as a thinker. That is how knowledge is structured and the upper class of the society is considered to be epitome of knowledge. This is discussed in the book *Annihilation of Caste*. There Roy says that the knowledge is colonised by the upper-class Hindus and through this they maintain the caste system. She recounts here how Ambedkar's older brothers were not allowed to learn Sanskrit because it is the language of the Vedas (Roy 53–54). In this novel, Bangshi wishes to study more and his portrayal as a person of wisdom is almost like a threat to Sanjoy. This is a transgression on the part of Bangshi as he tries to break the varna system that says that varna is based on birth not on *guna*. So, Bangshi though is depicted in the novel as a knowledgeable person, but he cannot wipe out the stigma that is associated with him. Even his surname "*adhikari*" bears this mark that he comes out from a low descent as the beggar who controls him, is called "*adhikari*" (Chowdhury 335). When he joins in the post of G.M. in Sanjoy's office, it becomes the most unwanted fact for him. At last, he resigns the post and leaves. Still Jhuma assumes that he leaves as he is afraid of being exposed by Sanjoy as a street kid (Chowdhury 361–362). In a film, called *3 Idiots*, there a boy named Rancho is a very bright student. But as he comes from a low descent, he studies in the school secretly. As Rancho's father works under a rich high-class person so the son of that rich one actually utilises the Opportunity. Rancho does his all studies on behalf of that boy. One day it is discovered and the rich person orders this to continue and keeps a condition that the degree has to be submitted to his son. In this film, later when Rancho's two friends come to find him in that house knowing that he is the heir of that house, they find that in the picture Rancho is replaced by another person. Later they also discover the actual thing (*3 Idiots, imdb.com*). Here also the caste angle is very predominant in the film.

CONCLUSIONS

Ramapada Chowdhury is that rare litterateur who enriches himself with a minute inner sight and who discovers a story of life in an apparent storyless society life. Partition, freedom and aftermath of war and casteism are the recurrent topics of his compositions. This is one of the approaches of looking at this novel. Researches can open up different prospects in this field to read how a voice is subjugated under this caste practise of this society. This novel is the testimonial of the society that shows the readers how a marginalised character has to surrender to the casteism of the society.

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