

Understanding the Caste-Gender Dichotomy, Suffering and “Rhetoric of Violence” Through Manju Bala’s *Ups and Downs* and *The Conflict*

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Abstract

The oppressive societal status of Bengali Dalit women, impacted by the intersectional factors of caste and gender discrimination, has not been discussed extensively by mainstream Bengali academia. Writings of Dalit women writers belonging to West Bengal gained significant momentum as a counter-discourse to challenge the stereotypical portrayal of the Dalit women populace by mainstream and male Dalit authors. Their writings criticize the caste factor that exercises its power through hierarchical forms of violence prevalent against Dalits in West Bengal. This article intends to analyze the painful lived experiences of the Bengali Dalit strata and the counter-representation of caste-based violence and oppression in two Bengali short stories titled *Ups and Downs* and *The Conflict* written by notable Bengali Dalit feminist and writer Manju Bala. These stories are analyzed from the background of Teresa De Lauretis’s concept of the “rhetoric of violence,” which recognizes how the language of violence codifies and constructs objects and subjects of violence to propagate dominant ideologies. The article investigates how the authors depict the traumatic effect produced by caste-based violence on the Dalit psyche. This article will also look at the factor of intersectionality and how it impacts the suffering of the Dalit women populace of West Bengal. To develop this paper, the researcher has consulted theoretical formulations on caste stratification, caste-gender subjugation, Brahmanical patriarchy, intersectionality, and traumatic realism to understand the holistic scenario of oppression faced by the Dalit women strata.

Keywords: caste, class, gender, suffering, intersectionality, violence

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Introduction

Bengali Dalit feminist and author Manju Bala, who wrote the short stories *Ups and Down* and *The Conflict* portrays the oppression, subjugation and despair of Bengali Dalit women in a tripartite manner based on their caste, class and gender identity. The narrative investigates how Bengali Dalit women being exposed to severe forms of physical, mental, and psychological violence which makes them utterly vulnerable in front of the heinous societal forces. Manju Bala's narrative *Ups and Downs* intricately explores the caste-class dichotomies, and the moral ambivalence embedded within contemporary Indian society. The story revolves around the impoverished Bengali Dalit mother-daughter duo Bhavani and Parul. Bhavani works as a domestic helper in the upper-class households. Due to severe economic crises Bhavani, admitted Parul to "a job in a wealthy family. Parul's responsibilities as a live-in maid include anything from cooking to cleaning rooms to performing errands and other domestic chores" (Bala, 2022, p. 28). But Bhavani's hope of economic upliftment crashes when her daughter Parul becomes the target of sexual predation by Proloy, son of her employers Amala Devi and Amal Babu. In the process Parul gets pregnant with Proloy's child and Bhavani receives the order of taking Parul away from Proloy's house. The news of Parul's pregnancy came as a shock to Bhavani and to save her daughter's life and to answer Amala Devi's boastful arrogant comments she claims, "all the difficulties will be solved if your son simply marries my daughter" (Bala, 2022, p. 29). What Bhavani in turn listens portrays a glimpse of the severe subjugation which the Dalit populace specifically the Bengali Dalit women section have to endure due to the intersectional factors of caste-class-gender and its associated repercussions in their day-to-day lives. Amala Devi replies to Bhavani, "what exactly did you say? My son's wedding with your daughter? For a low caste, you have an excessively largemouth! You have no right to say that! That is why you belong to the lower caste" (Bala, 2022, p. 29). This, however, does not mark the conclusion of the narrative because when Parul decides to keep the baby suddenly one day the slums where Parul and Bhavani live caught fire, "people are being cremated in their own beds as a result of the fire. Their terrible shouts reverberate across the air" (Bala, 2022, p. 30). Though amidst of all these severe situations Parul gave birth to her daughter, but this narrative starkly portrays the grim realities of Dalit suffering in contemporary times. This incident of Proloy's initial infatuation with Parul and his eventual abandonment of her and their baby portrays the fact that Parul's Dalit identity and economic destitution becomes the sole contributing factor behind her suffering. This event also narrates this reality though caste identity works as a hindrance in case of Proloy and Parul's relationship due to which Parul was denied getting the role of daughter-in-law in her employer's house but when Proloy approaches her with his ill intentions that time her caste identity did not become an obstruction for their association. So, from this instance this fact becomes clear that impoverished Dalit women are easily accessible to upper-caste men, and they can use them according to their whims and fancies and also can get rid of them whenever they want. Bala's *Ups and Downs* and "Conflict" portrays the structural violence that the Bengali Dalit populace have to encounter in their day-to-day lives.

Understanding Caste-Gender Suffering in Bengali Dalit Narratives

Caste constitutes a central and pervasive element of India's intricate social hierarchy, serving as a foundational basis for the systemic discrimination and marginalization of individuals positioned at the lowest strata of this structure. Even within this entrenched hierarchical system, it is the Dalit women "who face compounded forms of oppression due to their caste

and gender, spanning economic, physical, and mental aspects” (Cherechés, 2023, p. 1). Debdatta Chakraborty and Sarbani Banerjee’s (2024) study suggest,

‘Conflict’ centres on the romantic union of an impoverished orphan Bengali Dalit girl, Banani Mondal, and an affluent upper-caste Kalyan Kanjilal, who is a medical practitioner. Through her narrative technique, Bala portrayed the chain of events and suffering associated with Banani’s life following the unequal relationship with Kalyan on the pretext of caste, class, and gender. (p. 268)

From the short story “Conflict” we can easily decode how caste mechanism shapes as well as plays a role behind the suffering of the Dalit women characters substantially. Here in terms of Banani and Parul’s lived experiences their caste-gender intersectionality becomes the sole reason of their suffering. In terms of caste-gender intersectionality to understand the conceptualisation of Dalit feminism and Dalit politics academicians suggest:

since Dalit Feminism propounds its politics in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, it often revisits and revises the events and issues raised by the latter two. In such situations, we may find several overlaps in the concerns expressed by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism. (Pan, 2021, p. 50)

For a Dalit woman like Banani who has been married to Kalyan, an upper-caste man suffered extensively due to her short-sighted decision of marrying a man who though initially romantically involved with her but eventually tortures Banani and crashes all her aspirations. Similarly, in terms of Parul and Proloy’s relationship, Parul hailing from the impoverished Bengali Dalit section of the society being sexual victim of the whims of her upper-caste landlord’s son. Debdatta Chakraborty and Sarbani Banerjee through her study suggests, “the dichotomous scenario between the *bhadralok* experience and that of the lived experience of the Bengali Dalit strata are converse to each other” (2025, p. 180). Manoranjan Byapari in this regard suggests that in the post-partition scenario, “the upper caste Bhadrakol community set up some 149 unauthorised new colonies in and around Kolkata” (Byapari, 2018, p. 6), which was quite opposite to the case of the Dalit refugees who were trying to adjust themselves in the makeshift railway shanties. Through her storytelling technique in *Ups and Downs* and “Conflict” Bala intricately exposes the intertwined realities of caste and gender discrimination faced by Bengali Dalit women. These stories unveil how Dalit women endure subjugation in a dual front — oppressed not only by upper-caste subjugation but also by patriarchal norms within their own communities. Bala’s narratives underscore the systemic marginalization that these Bengali Dalit women section encounter, portraying their lives as a constant negotiation between survival and dignity. Whether through domestic subjugation, lack of access to education, or social exclusion, Bala’s characters embody the pain of invisibility and the resilience or resistance. Her narrative building confronts the harsh truth that liberation for Dalit women must challenge both caste oppression and gendered violence, demanding a voice in a society that routinely silences them.

The intertwined relationship between one’s caste and gender identity and the politics associated with it provides newer dimensions to understand and decode the situation of Dalit women populace in today’s society and it provides us a crucial reason because of which the role of Brahmanical patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy on Dalit women, the conceptualization of Dalit feminism and Dalit feminist standpoint, agential stance of Dalit women populace and how the Dalit feminist movement emerged in India, all these factors become really important

and pertinent for discussion. The degraded social status of Bengali Dalit women, signified by the intersectionality of caste and gender disparities is not well recognized in West Bengal so far. Bengali Dalit women writers in West Bengal gained momentum with a prospectus to challenge misrepresentations and stereotyping by mainstream and Dalit men writers. Through their writings Bengali Dalit women writers criticize the caste order that demonstrates its power through symbolic forms of violence against Dalits in West Bengal. This article is an attempt to understand representation and counter-representation of caste-based violence and oppression in two Bengali short stories by Dalit women writer Manju Bala. The stories are analyzed with the theoretical tenets of Teresa De Lauretis's concept of the "rhetoric of violence" that recognizes how the language of violence codifies and constructs objects and subjects of violence to propagate dominant ideologies as well as understanding the conceptualization of Dalit feminism from the perspective of caste-gender intersectionality. Dalit women's writings constitute the expressions of resistance, against the "institutionalized marginality" (Rao, 2003, p. 19) experienced by Dalits, politically positioned at the lower strata of caste-based social order.

Intersectionality as a Lens to Understand Bengali Dalit Narratives

It is evident that female subjugation is critical in determining the caste-based social order and maintaining racial purity. However, Dalit women stand out of these boundaries of purity, and hence, dehumanizing this community is not a difficult task for the upper caste patriarchal society. Ideologies of caste formations allow people to consider pervasive violence against Dalit women as demonstrations of the power hierarchy. Debdatta Chakraborty and Sarbani Banerjee's study minutely depicts how the caste-gender intersectionality affects the lives of the Dalit women characters substantially:

the emergence of intersectionality as a theoretical discourse started in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It grabs academic attention with the publication of Kimberle Crenshaw's celebrated article Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. Through this article, Crenshaw wanted to develop a framework 'for analysing power that encompasses and connects gender, class, and race-based subordination' (Pan, 2021, p. 24). Regarding the emergence of intersectionality in the Indian sub-continent, academicians situate the beginning of an intersectional thinking, especially in relation to the categories of caste and gender, to Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule (Kumar & Bakshi, 2022, p. 53). In the case of Indian contextualisation using the intersectional framework, Dalit Feminism highlights how Dalit women are erased/ignored by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics (Pan, 2021, p. 29). Intersectional discourse puts Dalit women at the crossroads of caste and gender, providing an alternative representational design for them focusing on the multiple axes of oppression (caste, class, and gender) to which they are exposed. The intersectional framework helps us to understand the oppressive lived experience of the Dalit women characters, shifting from the stereotypical monolithic representation of Dalit women either as 'women' or as 'Dalits.' (Chakraborty & Banerjee, 2024, p. 272)

French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir in her pioneering work *The Second Sex* (2009) has claimed, "one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman" (p. 283). From Beauvoir's notion of becoming a woman to Bama Faustina Susairaj's powerful proclamation in her notable work *Karukku* (2000) that "if a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her showing their teeth" (p. 94). While analysing

Dalit Narratives written by Bengali Dalit women authors it “vividly depicts the saga of dual oppression of Dalit women—firstly for being a Dalit, secondly and most importantly, for being a woman” (Chakraborty, 2025, p. 171). Additionally with these tenets the impoverished condition of Bengali Dalit section works as an additional catalyst behind their life-long suffering.

Through a close textual analysis of *Ups and Downs* and “Conflict” this study also delves to understand the effect of trauma to which both the central protagonists have been exposed to. At the end of “Conflict” Banani dies of the torture inflicted upon her since a substantial period of time. Similarly, Parul, with her family along with all the slum members have to face the brunt of Proloy’s anger literally and metaphorically. In this saga of suffering Parul not only loses her respect and dignity because of her early pre-marital pregnancy but also loses her home which was a place of shelter for her. The suffering to which Banani and Parul have been exposed portrays the strategic mechanism of control and structural violence imposed by the casteist patriarchal structures on the Bengali Dalit section.

Conclusion

Bala’s narrative provides a massive scope for revisiting the sufferings as well as the experiences of the Bengali Dalit women strata in West Bengal. Through the close textual analysis of Bala’s narrative, this study attempts to trace the shift from the simple, homogeneous perspective to the varied experiences of Bengali Dalit women strata based on multifaceted factors of their caste, class and gender identity. These short stories of Manju Bala, also adds new dimensions in terms of Bengali Dalit feminist scholarship because formerly while analysing the Bengali Dalit experiences the focal point of gender was substantially ignored. Manju Bala’s *Ups and Downs* and “Conflict” minutely portrays the otherized Dalit side of experience prevalent in West Bengal.

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