

The Common Cultural Forms as an Aesthetic Tool in Bangla Dalit Poetry*

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to study the nuances of the Dalit popular cultural forms that are part of their daily life impacting their literary representation. The paper will be studying the strategies of the poet Gautam Aali in the context of Bangla Dalit poetry, to understand how he challenges the hegemony of the given modes of dominant aesthetics through the use of popular forms. Gautam Aali critiques the deeply ingrained casteism of Bengali 'Bhadralok' society. He aligns himself with the folk poets of the "kobi-gaan" tradition of Bengal. According to him it is a tradition that critically evaluates society from the commoner's perspective. Aali celebrates the oral folk tradition as an equal and parallel tradition to the dominant literary tradition.

Keywords: Bangla Dalit, popular culture, aesthetic, dominant

The popular cultural forms are a part of the daily life of the Dalits and are used by them in their literary representations to create a separate and different aesthetic space. In the context of Bangla Dalit poetry, I will be closely reading one of the poems of the poet Gautam Aali to look at the strategies the Dalit poet uses to challenge the hegemony of the given modes of dominant aesthetics through the use of the popular forms.

Gautam Aali belongs to the Namasudra caste, a first-generation literate from this Dalit community. He is closely associated with the Bangla

* Based on the author's unpublished doctoral research.

Dalit literary movement and contributes to it as a poet and short story writer. He uses his writing as a means of political engagement and activism and to make his people aware of the Dalit movement. His poetry collection is titled *Choto Jater Sanglap* (2001) meaning 'The Lower Caste's Monologue'. The poems in this volume target and critique the deeply ingrained casteism of Bengali 'Bhadralok' society. The poems are constructed as the 'lower caste' Chotolok's attempt at a dialogue with the 'upper caste' 'Bhadralok' gentry. The initiative is taken by the Dalit poet in the absence of Bhadrakok interest in Dalit affairs. Aali is not his caste surname, but a pseudonym, which in Bangla means, one who stands on the 'aal' or the mud bund that demarcates the borders of the fields. According to him, it denotes the precarious and marginal position of the Dalit and also foregrounds his own peasant ancestry.

In the "Preface" (CJ, p. 5) to the collection Aali aligns himself with the folk poets of the "kobi-gaan" tradition of Bengal. According to him it is a tradition that critically evaluates society from the commoner's perspective. Aali celebrates the oral folk tradition as an equal and parallel tradition to the dominant literary tradition. It is posited as being closer to the Dalits as opposed to the literary or written idiom, language, and aesthetic of the Bhadrakok literati. In the "preface" he also says that he has to write in the language of his people to awaken them regarding their rights and their self-respect. Though he may have access to the language of the educated 'upper caste' Bhadrakok, his intended audience does not have access to it. In Bengal, it is a common practice for Dalit writers to read their poems aloud at their public gatherings and 'sahitya sabhas'. This makes the written word accessible to the illiterate public. The deliberate use of colloquial Bangla facilitates this transmission and re-asserts the dignity of the commoner's language to be an apt vehicle of good poetry.

It is a fact that the illiterate Dalit knows no better language than this. Aali insists on writing 'poetry' in this language, and discuss un-poetic subjects like history and newspaper reports of atrocities on Dalits within his poems. He thus makes a radical statement regarding Dalit literary discourse and aesthetics; its difference from the dominant literary aesthetics is apparent. The dominant aesthetic is based on concepts of beauty and decorum and represents an imaginative and romantic worldview. Contrary to this, the Dalit worldview is located within the realistic and practical sphere of their 'lived experiences'. Thus, the Dalit

poet's language is colloquial, prosaic, and un-poetic. The subject matter is violent and 'inappropriate'.

The "politics" that is part of social life is the professed theme of his poems. The first poem of the collection is titled, "Jaat-Paat? Dhush" (CJ, p. 7). A reading of this poem to study the nuances of the Dalit self he constructs by foregrounding popular modes of representation will be undertaken. The title signifies the usual 'upper caste' stance regarding casteism in Bengal. The Bhadrakolok deny its existence and laugh away Dalit attempts to suggest the contrary. The poem critiques the 'upper caste' stance that caste is a non-signifier in West Bengal society and politics and focuses on the double standards that operate regarding caste in Bengal. Aali is able to expose the 'upper caste' hypocrisy through the persona, who represents different aspects of the Dalit. The persona functions at multiple levels simultaneously. The persona appears as a gullible semi-literate village person who speaks a colloquial East Bengal dialect and exhibits a deep sympathy and affinity with the dominant discourse regarding Bengal and the Dalits. The poet's tongue-in-cheek tone is affected through the pretended humility and submissiveness of the persona as he engages in an informal 'adda' with the Bhadrakolok.

The persona adopts a deceptively deferential self-deprecating tone to address a generalized caste elite Bhadrakolok auditor to seek his 'permission' to study 'history'. The pose of exaggerated humility and submissive compliance underscores the behavioural pattern expected and extracted from the 'lower castes' in Bengal by the Bhadrakolok or well born gentry. The 'Chotolok' or lowly born are not allowed any agency or authority. In the Kobi Gaan the songster/poet takes on a persona and spars with his opponent. The Dalit poet uses a similar strategy here to put his point across to the Bhadrakolok gentry in this informal 'Adda'.

Through the informal mode the persona, 'unwittingly' makes a very powerful political statement when he seeks 'permission' to read and discuss 'history'. Three important issues are embedded in the opening question—"I have this desire to study History if you would kindly permit" (CJ, p. 7). First, is the need for Dalits to study and know their history to enable them to understand their present. Second, the issue of 'upper caste' permission is linked to the question of Dalit authority and autonomy regarding their 'self' and their 'history'. And, the third is the related issue of silencing Dalit history and the need for Dalits

to excavate and negotiate the historical for the success of the present struggle. Knowledge of history will lead to Dalit empowerment. The history the persona chooses to discuss is the travails faced by Ambedkar in his attempt to educate himself. By invoking Ambedkar the poet places himself and the poem within the context of the Ambedkarite discourse and the stress it lays on the need to educate, agitate, and unite. The persona apparently remains oblivious of Dalit politics in his meandering conversation or musings.

In "Jaat Paat? Dhush!" Aali makes the persona exhibit a psyche that has been moulded by internalization of the dominant ideology regarding Dalits. The internalization of a negative self-image and the resultant inferiority complex is apparently so deep that the persona readily accepts and condones casteist practices and does not hesitate to spout casteist, derogatory, and politically incorrect statements regarding Dalits. The persona appears to lack the intellectual subtlety of the 'upper caste' ideologues and is therefore unable to mask his casteist remarks. His naïve avowal of casteism exposes the crassness of the 'upper caste' mindset. He agrees with the dominant perspective in the most ingratiating manner. For instance, regarding Ambedkar he says, "was that fellow a human being? I mean a human like other people?/ Not at all" (CJ, p. 7).

The persona suggests that ugly matters of the historical past are best left aside as they have no immediate contemporary significance. The gap between the intended meaning of the persona and the implied meaning of the poet, ironically highlight the immense importance of 'history' and Ambedkar to the Dalit cause. He also records the Bhadraklok discomfiture and disquiet at Dalit interest in Ambedkar and their history. The Dalits' past is not dead but lives on in the form of present-day atrocities. This fact is brought home through the catalogue of news items pertaining to atrocities on Dalits from different parts of the country. Aali deliberately brings in the 'unpoetic' news in many of his poems to highlight the link between the contemporary and history.

The 'upper caste' resistance to Dalits permeates the social fabric of Bengal but the persona presents Bengal as the "mecca of equal love where caste-wast does not exist". The poem presents the persona's fallacy through the news item about the "Harijans" of "Gopinathpur village in Medinipur Jila" of West Bengal who still live in conditions

prevailing in Ambedkar's time, and the children "cannot be admitted to the village school/Even if they get admitted they cannot enter the classroom" (CJ, p. 10).

In "Jaat-paat? Dhush!" the persona parrots the dominant discourse about poetry—that it should preach, be beautiful, and elevating. He even tries to copy the dominant style and embarks on a celebration of beauty, of the sky, the moon, the stars, etc. His exercise fails and becomes a parody of romantic poetry. He soon tires of the romantic abstractions and says, "what beautiful news" (p. 9) with total disregard for poetic propriety and aesthetics. Paradoxically, he chooses to focus not on the 'beautiful news' but on news that catalogues atrocities on Dalits in different parts of independent India. Constitutionally untouchability is banned, but it is practised with impunity all over India in varying degrees. An example from South India is given where the nine-year-old Dalit girl Thamanmarie's eyes were gouged out by the school teacher for having touched the water pitcher (p. 8). This is followed by a series of reports regarding violence on Dalit women. Oppression of their women, genocide and mass murder are the daily news items pertaining to Dalits. The condition of the 'upper castes' has improved in post-colonial India, but the Dalits continue to remain enslaved and victims of internal colonization, and their situation has not radically changed from the colonial past.

The dominant rhetoric posits Bengal as being 'different' from the other states of India with regard to casteism. The persona mimics the 'dominant voice' when he says—"let them go to Hell, those things can happen in Bihar-Vihar, Uttar Pradesh or Rajasthan/Not in our state" (CJ, p. 8). The persona suggests that such atrocities thankfully happen outside Bengal. It celebrates the Bengali identity forgetting the fact that Bengal is a part of India and such atrocities are a national shame. The parochial regionalism of the dominant castes is put in context of the Dalits' nationalism. The Dalit identifies with all marginalized groups around the world. The poet thus constructs the Dalit self to be the true humanitarian and global citizen. The counter image is that of the 'upper caste' who are represented as limited and selfish in their outlook.

The dominant complacency regarding to Bengal is further elaborated in the persona's litany of 'development' that various kinds of 'revolution' facilitated by the Left government brought about in the state:

Here we have agricultural revolution
 Here we have Panchayati Raj
 Here we have revolution in education
 Here we have Cultural Revolution
 Here there is democracy
 Here there is the Royal Bengal Tiger (CJ, p. 8).

Bengal is represented as the place of equality and communal amity where “riots don’t happen”. This picture about Bengal is similar to the image that is projected by the state government in the media. It is pertinent to mention here that the ‘Marichjhapi’ massacre had taken place to oust the Dalit settlers from the Sunderban area in the name of conservation of the reserved forest and the Tiger. For the Dalits the Utopic picture of Bengal is a ‘cooked’ and spiced up image with the uncomfortable ‘bones’ conveniently removed from the fish to make it palatable and easy for consumption.

The elision of caste within the class rhetoric of the Left is what the persona targets next. He says he has given the list of Bengal’s glorious achievements only to ‘say one thing’, that is, ‘caste’ does not exist in the “red fortress” of Bengal. The matrimonial columns do indeed reveal caste preferences of the people, but he is ironically indulgent of such practices and suggests that these are harmless and that endogamy is actually the people’s way of exercising their ‘democratic’ right to choose their own kind.

The tone of the persona gradually alters as he reads out examples of superstition and regressive beliefs of the ‘Brahman’ Leftist political leaders. He represents the lavish consumerist lifestyle of the political leaders who speak about class struggle and equality but insist on maintaining inequalities of both ‘caste’ and ‘class’. They profess to be atheists but are shown to be extremely superstitious and regressive. The poet thus hints that these politicians are not true ‘Marxists’.

He speaks about a news item that appeared on December 3, 1997 in the mainstream newspapers like the *Ananda Bazar* and the *Statesman*. The ‘news’ pertained to a group of ‘Harijans’ who live in the village of Gopinathpur in Medinipur Jila. He deliberately uses the word ‘Harijan’ to factor in the Gandhian perspective on Dalits and its ‘difference’ from the Ambedkarite position. Ambedkar and Gandhi thus form the two poles within which the condition of Dalits in Left governed Bengal is discussed. The mask of the persona almost slips before it is replaced and

he reiterates that the newspapers could not possibly be right. He says that how can a hundred-year-old custom still remain in West Bengal?

The persona tries to make the auditor believe the leaders and their rhetoric of having revolutionized Bengal. The news regarding caste-based discrimination in Medinipur proves the rhetorical claims wrong and in the debate between the 'head' and the 'heart' the persona chooses the irrational heart. Because rationality would demand that he condemned the politicians. He postures to be the good and obedient Dalit citizen who remains wilfully blind to the faults of the political class that exploits them. His final statements sarcastically present the Dalit as irrational and emotional. Ironically, to believe the developmental rhetoric of the 'State' the Dalit needs to disbelieve the truth of their lived experience and the one proclaimed in the print media. The only way these opposing truths can be reconciled in his supposedly befuddled mind is by believing that the 'upper caste' owners must have mistakenly printed a hundred-year-old news item as 'current news', or it must be a "bourgeois capitalist, imperialist conspiracy!" The Dalit persona's brilliant resolution of the problem is a masterstroke of irony. The ironical undercutting of the given statement suggests the need to sift out the 'truth' from the false rhetoric of the dominant. Bengal is an 'Utopia' for the leaders but a 'Dystopia' for the 'Harijans'. The poem ends with a subtle hint for the imperative need for political engagement on the part of the Dalits. The persona reiterates that history is 'unimportant' and embarks on a mock eulogizing of nature's beauty. He ends by asserting that "caste-waste? In Bengal? Rubbish –."

The persona wears the mask of a gullible naïve Dalit and through it mockingly undercuts the dominant rhetoric. For example, the persona's over enthusiastic endorsement of the dominant renders both as suspect. The Bhadraklok auditor's discomfort too is an indicator of the gap between the rhetoric and the reality. The persona does not allow the auditor to articulate his doubts. He pre-empts him and literally puts words into his mouth. This strategy of imputing meaning and intentionality does not allow the other's voice to emerge and effectively silences it. This has been the dominant strategy with reference to Dalits. The poet here turns the tables through the medium of the persona, to symbolically silence the dominant 'Other', and give 'voice' to the Dalit. Significantly the overt Dalit speaker poses as a supporter of the dominant discourse and seems not to represent the authentic 'voice', of the Dalit. The authentic

'voice' actually emerges through the ironic undercurrent that alerts us to the slippages and silences of the text. Aali thus problematizes the issue of the authentic Dalit voice. He also raises the issue of who has the right to speak for the Dalit. Dalit writers usually complain that the authentic Dalit voice and experience cannot be found in dominant representations of the Dalit.

The poet suggests that the rustic persona understands that he cannot win through an open confrontation with the dominant. He therefore chooses to be an ardent supporter, a hanger on, who in the guise of celebrating the dominant self exposes its darker side and weaknesses. The over enthusiastic persona does more harm to the dominant image than good and is made extremely subversive in intent by the poet. The poet suggests that the Dalit is not a dumb victim, but a smart person who is aware of what is wrong with the system. But as he cannot directly criticize it he therefore wears a mask.

At one level he appears as a blind supporter of the Left-government, but at another level one suspects that this is nothing but a put on mask to fool the dominant class. There are times when his mask almost slips to reveal the sharpness it hides. Aali uses the persona to highlight the complexities and ambivalences that riddle the Dalit self. Interestingly, both the Dalit and the dominant discourses are presented through the persona. The persona's blind celebration of 'Left' rule in Bengal ironically reflects the dominant 'voice' and 'position' while it simultaneously offers a Dalit critique of it. The auditor thus fails to be the 'true' representative of the dominant 'voice'. The persona appropriates that role by donning the mantle of the faithful sycophant. Though the 'voice' of the dominant auditor is barely audible his 'objection' or 'dissenting' gestures signify the existence of an oppositional point of view that is different from that of the persona. The persona appears to be a schizophrenic personality. The poet suggests that many Dalit persons too are split likewise between their loyalties to the Dalit and dominant discourses. The persona's extreme gullibility is a put-on mask yet it suggests a negative trait among Dalits, which makes them fall victim to false promises and claims of the state.

In the other poems, Aali does not restrict himself only to Bangla, he freely uses words from Hindi, English, and Urdu to give the feel of an informal 'adda'. For Aali, it is a non-formal, non-academic 'space' where dissenting, unorthodox views are presented. It does not follow 'rules'. It is

freewheeling, intellectually challenging, and stimulating but not serious and boring. The issues he picks up are very important for the Dalit cause, but he chooses to discuss them in an informal, colloquial, random manner. This is a deliberate attempt to undercut the practice of discussing important issues 'formally'. He suggests that the 'common man' has no other forum but the 'adda' to discuss these matters. The 'formal' space of state and policies is not available to the Dalit. The poet is well aware of the limitations of the 'adda' to bring about social change. But he also suggests that what is discussed there, if taken seriously, can alter social trajectories. In "Jaat Paat? Dhush!" his tone is conversational and the poem is structured like an 'adda', that can take place anywhere in an impromptu manner between two or more like-minded people. In the poem the poet-persona speaks to the 'upper-caste' person but the 'Other' does not speak, or is allowed to speak. Thus, the poet changes the rules and presents only the persona's 'voice' and effectively silences the 'Other'. There is no 'real' dialogue between the two because the Dalit persona interprets and represents the 'other's' words and 'actions' for the reader. If we 'read' the poem within the context of the 'kobi-gaan' tradition, which Aali confesses inspires him, we find that even there he plays with the rules. The contest is in the form of a dialogue or debate between two equal participants. In the poem the Bhadrakalok has been relegated to the 'secondary' position of an auditor. He listens and at times intervenes but his 'words' do not reach the audience or the reader of the text. The Dalit persona puts words into his mouth and literally gags him and he ceases to be an equal participant in the 'dialogue'. Furthermore, the persona imputes a 'voice' and 'point of view' to him that might not be completely his. There is, in effect a trading of places between the dominant and the subaltern 'Other'. With the 'Subaltern' finding their voice the dominant appears to have been silenced. This is also affected by relegating the 'dominant codes' that impact the Dalits' space in the form of the universal given to insignificance. The Dalit's mocking laughter undercuts its primal dominant position in their lives. When the Dalit narrates his self the Brahmanical 'Other' 'within' and 'without' the Dalit's consciousness gets negated, nullified, and silenced. The Dalit's access to 'voice' and 'agency' is only possible through a symbolic killing or silencing of the 'Other'.

Endnotes

1. Gautam Aali, *Choto Jater Sanglap*, Calcutta: Chaturtha Duniya, 2001. Henceforth cited as (C). The poems used in this paper are translated by

me. The collection of poems was written in protest, anger, and anguish at the disrespect shown to Ambedkar's statue by putting a garland of shoes on it. This incident happened on July 11, 1997 at the Ramabai Ambedkar colony in Ghatkopar, Maharashtra. The desecration of Ambedkar's statue and insult to Dalit selfhood was marked by nationwide protests. In Bengal, a group of Dalit intellectuals including the poet held a protest meet at Sealdah under the banner of the Choddoi April (April 14) committee.

2. The 'kabi-gaan' is an entertaining contest between two songsters who use ready wit, repartee, and a colloquial idiom that is at times not too refined, to debate and comment on various issues ranging from society, religion, politics, and science. The person who is ultimately silenced concedes defeat. The 'Bhadralok' do not consider them as true poets and their compositions as examples of pure or good poetry. For Aali, who grew up watching such contests, they represent the great intellectual and stylistic skills of the folk poets.
3. 'Dalit' comparatively is a more current usage than 'Harijan' and probably the village folk would identify themselves as 'Harijan' than Dalit, see Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay, "Caste, kinship and agrarian structure: Case study of three types of villages in Hooghly district", in *Man in India*, 77. 1-4, (March 1997), 35-49.
4. For a history of 'adda' and its formal aspect see Dipesh Chakrabarty, (2001) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Oxford University Press.

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