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Refugee Life and the Discourse of Dignity in the Short Fiction of Jatin Bala

BASUDHARA ROY

Abstract. The refugee has always occupied an abject position within the official discourses of nationhood, citizenship and belonging. Politically and legally identified as an 'other', the refugee's personhood, most often, fails to receive acknowledgement of its due humanity. Not only do refugees lose voice and identity in relocating to a new country but often the essential dignity of life itself is compromised for them to the greatest possible extent. Characterized perpetually as aliens, intruders and villains who constitute a drain upon the economic resources of the host country, they are always held under suspicion – legal and cultural – and constitute the most marginalized population group in any society. This paper seeks to read Dalit refugee life as put forward in the short fiction of Jatin Bala and seeks to pay attention to its invigorative potential in crafting a discourse of human dignity.

Keywords : Dalit; dignity; refugee; marginalization; resilience; strength.

"…I have lived in three refugee camps since the age of four and a half, silently witnessed great atrocities of caste, worked as a farm hand in fields to feed myself, studied in the railway platform," states Jatin Bala in a conversation contained in *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal*. (216) Born on 5th May, 1949 at Parhiyali, Manirampur in Jessore in East Pakistan, now in Bangladesh, Jatin Bala is an award-winning and widely regarded fiction writer. A refugee and a Dalit, his powerful and poignant writing spans the trajectory of physical and emotional trauma and dehumanization from the doubly marginalized position of the Dalit refugee. Orphaned at an early age, Bala migrated from Bangladesh to India during the communal riots and making his way through several refugee camps, settled here permanently, going on to obtain a Masters degree in Bengali literature from the University of Calcutta. Embarking on his career as a teacher, he later joined The West Bengal Government's Youth Welfare Department as an officer. Author of fourteen books including an autobiography, Bala's life has been a living testimony to poverty, discrimination, human cruelty, state torture, as also faithful resilience, defiant resistance and proud assertion against his circumstances.

Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal brings to readers a valuable collection of twelve short stories by Jatin Bala that narrate, assess and critique the various historical dimensions of the Dalit refugee experience in West Bengal. The first eleven of these stories are from the original *Samaj Chetanar Galpo* (The Story of Consciousness of Society) published in 2012 by *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World), a pioneering journal of Bengali

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Dalit literature that has been published by the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (BDSS) since its formation in 1994 while the twelfth story appeared in an English translation first in *Muse India* (November–December 2012). All twelve stories document narratives of survival from the period of one of the greatest population movements in the history of the Indian subcontinent – the Partition of Bengal. Bala's writing is unsparingly realistic, rugged and determined in its attempt to fill the gaps in a history authored by the powerful. Speaking for the undocumented, the voiceless and the statistically immaterial population groups in history, he defiantly prastices truth-telling and struggles to archive an entire movement of generating dignity-consciousness within a mass of people for whom even the right to life had been deemed as illegitimate.

Translated empathetically from the original Bengali into English by an eclectic array of writers and edited by noted Dalit scholar, Jaydeep Sarangi, these are sinewy stories remarkable not only for their sharp delineation of the sociological scene of Bengal but also for their powerful aesthetics of inspiring vitality and awe for the exemplary virtue of being human. In his Editor's Note to the collection, Sarangi writes, "While refugees have always struggled for stability and rootedness, low caste refugees have struggled harder being doubly disadvantaged - almost predictably they have been victims of the worst infringement of human rights." (*Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal,* 9) He regards Bala's stories as an invaluable testimony to the post-Partition experiences of the Namasudra community in Bengal and as "personal accounts by the Dalit refugees where the narrator or the protagonist moves back and forth between the individual "I" and the collective "we". (10) In his interview with Sarangi, Jatin Bala states:

> I have seen my house set on fire right before my eyes. To save our lives, we hid behind thickets all night. Everything we owned had been looted by rioters. Reduced to indigence, we crossed the border on foot and took shelter in a refugee camp of the Government of India. It was the most painful experience. We, the uprooted dalits, were the worst victims of Partition. (175)

Within the discourses of nationhood, citizenship and belonging, the refugee has always occupied an abject position. Identified politically and legally through the essential category of 'otherness', the refugee's personhood marks itself as an unwelcome and inassimilable subject in the society and culture of the host country. In *Literature with a White Helmet*, Lava Asaad argues:

> The plight of refugees is typically seen either as a collective experience and mass of people who are

> treated as sub-humans, or individually where the refugee is all too often associated with malice and threat to national security. One main privilege that refugees often lose the minute they cross borders is the right to have a voice, which entails the loss of being heard and acknowledged as human beings.(2)

The loss of voice entails an absolute relinquishing of identity and agency so that the refugee is expected to be a passive recipient of abuse and suffering everywhere. Characterized as aliens, intruders and villains who constitute a drain upon the economic resources of the host country, refugees are charged with the guilt of having begotten not merely their own personal misfortune but also of bringing misfortune upon the host society by their presence. Understood often as a "horde of moving bodies" (Asaad, 4), their lives are looked upon as uncountable, insignificant and immensely dispensable. Regarding the influx of refugees in West Bengal, Debjani Sengupta writes:

> From February 1950, the number of refugees entering West Bengal became a deluge. By rail or walking barefoot, a large number of people crossed into West Bengal. One arm of this multitude crossed the railway station at Darshana and entered the state where they were temporarily sheltered at the camp in Banpur. The second arm, coming from the south-western areas of East Pakistan, ended at the camp at Bongaon. Throughout the years 1950-51, as the rehabilitation and relief programmes of the state government buckled under a crisis of such magnitude, the refugees decided to take matters in their own hands. They undertook forcible land acquisitions and began establishing squatter colonies. […] The government was alarmed, as were the landowners whose hired goons went around breaking the makeshift huts of the refugees. Those in government camps were also living under inhuman conditions. In such a situation the need was felt to unite the refugees into a cohesive political force to demand their rights and to plan for their rehabilitation. (185-186)

In a caste-conscious country like India, the refugee problem is aggravated and compounded if the refugee happens to be a Dalit – an occupant of the lowermost rung in the orthodox Hindu caste ladder. While these lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy had been labelled by the British in colonial India as the "Depressed classes", the Census Report of India in 1931 gave these marginalized sections of people a new nomenclature, calling them the 'Exterior classes'. The Marathi term 'Dalit' was initially used by Jyotirao Phule in his *Dalitodhar* programme and in

1930, the Pune based newspaper *Dalit Bandhu* used the term as a translation for the 'Depressed Classes'. Formerly the untouchables, later the *Harijans* and still later, the Scheduled Castes, 'Dalit' was a term adopted by the oppressed classes of India in the late sixties and seventies of the last century. Derived from the Sanskrit root verb *dal*, meaning to crack or split, the term 'Dalit' refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way. The word also inherently denies the notions of pollution and karma that were used to justify caste hierarchy and exclusion, and rejects the paternalistic and charitable connotations of the term *Harijan*, as well as the caste system as a whole. The term acquired currency in post-Independence India in 1973 with the Dalit Panther manifesto hailing it as a term of both empowerment and resilience within the framework of discrimination and deprivation. While Dalits as citizens of the Indian nation-state have had a tumultuous history of asserting their dignity and bargaining for equality and liberty as full citizens, the experience of Dalit refugees who arrived in Bengal in the wake of the Partition was a trauma of greater magnitude. Though all refugees had to struggle hard in their battle for survival and to find a foothold in their adopted country, for Dalits who stood out in the social fabric as outsiders by both caste and nationality, the challenges of survival were harder.

The Dalit protagonists in each of the twelve stories in Bala's collection become inheritors of the writer's troubled legacy of memory, experience and angst. In 'Martyr', the protagonist ruminates:

> A life which had been carefully built over forty years was shattered in a split second. It was crushed and it disappeared somewhere into the earth, blown away in the dust. Blown away in the dust by things who looked like me, called humans, the world's most vicious hated living beings. (110)

In story after story, one encounters horrifying accounts of what has been lost – life, home, dignity, dreams, family, neighbourhood, community and humanity. However, what stands out more remarkably in these narratives is not the damage and loss but the immense potential for repair, regeneration and resurrection of life. Firm believers in the powers of the mind, Bala's protagonists stride two different worlds all the time – the outer physical world of threat, insecurity, prejudice and suffering, and the inner psychological world of hope, strength and dream. While their corporeal existence is wrecked by every conceivable human suffering – poverty, hunger, thirst, victimization, violence and regular diminishment of their existence, their inner world strives for control and sanity. However difficult their physical circumstances may be, their emotional and spiritual resources are stupendous and it is this inner strength that they use to build themselves and the tottering self-confidence of the marginalized and dispossessed everywhere around them. Resilient, determined and spiritually invincible, Bala's characters stand out by their firm appropriation of agency through a defiant reclamation of their voice.

Confident of their self-worth and speaking truth to power, they refuse to be cowed down by meta-narratives of social hegemony and seek to establish a firm brotherhood of Man. Whether it is Jawhar Sarkar, Atul Mistri, Mani Mohan, Ratan Dhali or any other protagonist in these stories, each is defiant in asserting the humanity of the downtrodden and their right to strive and receive opportunities for a better life. Confidence, self-belief, hard work and adaptability are important virtues in the arsenal of Bala's characters and it is with this that they endeavour to confront and configure their lives into better shapes.

Bala attempts in his stories an honest first-hand portrayal of what he calls 'refugee life from below'. In his narratives, the homogenized idea of the refugee is splintered to reveal its various contradictory facets. While the predominant media image of the refugee is that of an easy, border-traversing nomad, Bala's stories depict the strict policing of borders and the incarceration of the refugees in camps where every moment of living is foreshadowed by horror. The mainstream image of abstract, othered refugee hordes is dispelled in his stories to settle on individuals who are every bit as committed to their adopted nation as its host citizens are. Not only this, by endowing each of his protagonists a unique set of skills that has the potential to make them stand out in a crowd and contribute to the economy and culture of their community in rich ways, Bala actively contests and deconstructs the image of the refugee as a passive and indifferent consumer of the host-nation's resources. In addition to this, Bala's Dalit refugees have the wisdom to recognize that their plight is not their alone but acutely symptomatic of a social fabric that is built on prejudice, denial and discrimination. This is why his protagonists manifest themselves as not individual fortune-hunters but as visionary community builders who see themselves not as peculiar victims but as partaking of the legacy of the host-culture's flawed organizational structures.

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asks, "The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" (21) In *Frames of War*, she writes:

> Specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense. (1)

In the larger socio-historical narratives of competition, conflict and violence, when humans are reduced to mere statistical figures, their right to human dignity is often lost. From time to time in history, there have been social groups in whose case the loss of dignity or life itself has not been officially regarded as a loss because they were not counted as humans to begin with. The word 'dignity' deriving from the Latin *dignitas* refers to the state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect. It

is argued that all human beings, regardless of age, size, stage of development, or immediately exercisable capacities, have equal fundamental dignity. Dignity is a many-layered philosophical concept and has wide social, cultural, political, ethical, legal and even ecological ramifications. The term has been frequently debated on moral, ableist and anthropocentric grounds. People dependent on others on account of illness or disability, for instance, may experience an erosion of their sense of dignity even if their real dignity remains uncompromised. On moral grounds also, it is argued that human dignity is the entitlement of only those human beings who are morally blameless or at least much less guilty and violators of rights, victimizers and criminals have forfeited their chance to acquire dignity. Similarly, on ecological grounds, there is no basis for thinking that the human species alone has dignity among all the species; or that if the human species does have dignity, that its dignity is greater than the dignity of any other species. However, despite all controversies, it is widely agreed that all entities, whether sentient or non-sentient have an identity and an autonomy that needs to be acknowledged by way of being cognizant of their space and their intrinsic rather than utilitarian value in the scheme of things. This cognizance of being is understood as dignity and when applied to the case of humans, constitutes an appeal to human dignity. Within political and sociological narratives, the lives of refugees and Dalit refugees in particular have been the most unacknowledged. Not granted ontological status in socio-cultural or human terms, their miseries and sufferings have remained unworthy of being heard, attested or documented. The humanity of Dalits and refugees has had a persistent history of disposability and disregard and their loss or death constitutes a mere figure in a report, beyond the need for investigation or mourning. Perpetually persecuted and dehumanized, the greatest resistance of Dalit refugees has been in the staunch assertion of their human dignity. This is what Jatin Bala's stories triumphantly do. In 'Resurrection', the author writes:

> The same life force now permeates through all – it makes you think that the world is dear to you – really too good. What I want, hundreds of thousands of other people also want. This is social justice. Every soul is equal – no caste- no colour- no gender discrimination. The only thing that matters is being human. Atul can hold the whole world in his palm. (37)

The spirit animating these stories is not merely one that has set out to battle oppression against dalit refugees and to make a case for their suffering and entitlements but one that bravely calls out to all oppressed groups of humanity to unite and speak out against whatever form of oppression or tyranny belittles their everyday existence. Bala's characters are all scriptwriters of their own lives – an act which they refuse to relinquish to society or politics. A significant addition to the corpus of Indian English fiction via translation, these are stories that will be

read and relied upon for philosophical replenishment and affirmative activist action every single time the human spirit is in need of strength, succour and hope.

Basudhara Roy
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Karim City College, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand

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