

## LOOKING INTO A BANGLADESHI DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY: HARISHANKAR JALADAS'S "NONAJOLE DUBSANTAR"

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**Panna Majumder**

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Kumargaon, Sylhet-3114, Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Born in a fishing family, Harishankar Jaladas is the only voice from the Dalit community in post-independence Bangladesh. A Dalit figure in Bangladeshi literature Harishankar Jaladas is yet to be explored with full potentiality in research. His writing about the "low-caste" people saturated with an experiential authenticity sufficiently validates his entry into literary circle as a Dalit writer. Jaladas' larger authorial engagement predominantly takes "lower" caste people in his literary purview. Being a Dalit his lived experience supplies all the materials he projects in his narrative and so, the narrative-tendency is perceptibly to an exposure of true marginal living. This explains why his self-narrative *Nonajole Dubsantar* (2018) can be considered to be an assistive base for understanding his other fictional narratives. However apart from the assistive value his autobiography alone deserves to be examined for being a Dalit autobiography the merit of which will be examined as its focal point in this article. Needless to say a discussion in generic fitness mandated by the Dalit writers and critics will be incorporated in the scope of the research. In other words the critical intervention will examine the viability of situating Jaladas' autobiography in the larger corpus of Dalit autobiographical practices.

**Keywords:** *Dalit, self-narrative, marginal, experiential authenticity, generic fitness.*

Autobiography by its very spirit encapsulates what is personal. For a Dalit the personal sphere has long been a byproduct of a long standing, systematic and normalized discrimination of the oppressive Hindu upper caste establishment. So, the personal account in a Dalit autobiography ever tends to overbrim the pure-personal possibility; it forces the account to be more communal and representative. The private self in the narrative is shrouded by the marginal one entwined with deprivations and humiliations felt throughout a Dalit's life time. Consequently the act of writing is consciously forged as an act of protest directed against the Brahminical casteist norms and Savarna system which is complicit in perpetuating the caste-oriented Hindu social settlement. Dalit literature in which Dalit autobiography is a significant

component addresses this studied and organized disparity in all possible detail unmasking the power nexus involved in the total upper caste Hindu establishment. This act of surfacing the long held discrimination and the immediate act of accosting the disparity can be considered to be a fitting yardstick for legitimizing our selected Dalit autobiography for the designation, Dalit autobiography.

Prior to venturing into the generic fitness examination regarding Harishankar Jaladas' self-narrative *Nonajole Dubsantar*, metaphorically meaning 'faring through ordeals in life', the author's Dalit identity deserves our attention. Harishankar Jaladas in *Nijer Songe Dekha* ('Encountering Myself'), a compilation of interviews he gave to different media in different times, declares his identity: "I was born in a Dalit community, *Nomoshudra* to be precise" (89). The very birth in a fishing community with *Namasudra* caste identity clearly makes Harishankar Jaladas a Dalit in Bangladeshi Hindu society. His frequent reference to his birth place, Patenga, a coastal area in Chattogram and also to the Bay of Bengal further attest his Dalit identity since territorial marginalization, a form of exclusion, is forced on the Dalits' settlement by the upper caste Hindus. Indian anthropologist N. C. Bose's observation can be pertinent here: "In Bengal, and especially in East Bengal, wherever there are rivers and canals, one can find the members of the *Namasudra* caste. Hindu society has always deposed this agricultural caste and has gone to the extent of treating its members as untouchables and making them live in the fringes of the village' " (qtd. in Chowdhury 7). Besides the *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* published in 1973 from Bombay (Present day Mumbai) qualifies all "[m]embers of Scheduled Castes" (Satyanarayna and Tharu 62) as Dalit and Jaladas being a fisherman unquestionably belongs to the Schedule Caste and so to a major Hindu Dalit (Chowdhury 11). While his Dalit identity is unquestionably established on socio-biological front his self narrative remains to be contested for the promise a Dalit autobiography makes for the Dalit community. The promise and the purposiveness are two aspects for this research to critically engage with and to that end the whole focus will be deployed now.

Following the precedence of other autobiography writers Harishankar Jaladas explains the context of writing his autobiography. A brief account of the merits of autobiography by both good people and bad ones is followed by the rationale for writing his autobiography:

My life is a salty one. I was born close to the salty Bay of Bengal. In diverse turns of my journey that I have made so far, life was full of unpleasant and unpalatable experiences. They may not receive favour from the readers. And it goes without saying that those I wrote about here will be left bitter only. Even then it seems my lived life of sixty five years, story of passion, perseverance, sorrow and delight, will not frustrate them [the readers] that much. (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 12)

The selection of the prefatory note to the autobiography offers a bruised and disgruntled Dalit who is humbled and cautious in approaching the readers and also unflinching in

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retaliating the minions of the casteist society. The justification for writing the self-narrative assures a sulking Dalit writer a literary encounter with the *Savarna* system and also assures a value-added reading. So a two-fold motivation is promised in his prefatory note for the self-narrative: 1) sharing the subhuman existence and thereby standing in solidarity with his fellow Dalits across the world and 2) upsetting the implied few through narrating their role circumstantially. Unusual as the second motivation is it must be conceived in a broader scope as the targeted few are the auxiliary force working to support the Brahminical-Savarna base; it further hints at the possibility of agency on the part of a Dalit autobiographer in language. In a similar prefatory note to *Joothan: A Dalit's Life (2003)*, another Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki writes about his motivation for the self-narrative: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless toward Dalits. I have wanted to put the narrative of my pain into writing for a long time" (xiii). The act of literal presentation of Dalit experiences is highly goal-oriented which has rightly been addressed by Sharankumar Limbale: "That society may change and understand its problems – their [Dalits'] writing articulates this impatience with intensity" (33). Additionally such a focalized narrative might bolster Dalit consciousness to end the status quo as it retains a transformative power.

Dr. Tanuja Trivedi discusses the very purposiveness of Dalit autobiography in comparison with the non-Dalit autobiographies. In her prescriptive account she implicates what to aim at if the self-narrative is to be considered for Dalit movement:

It is clear then that Dalit autobiographies, like the autobiographies of other socially marginalized groups, serve a very different purpose than those of famous celebrities or historical personalities. Their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. (118)

A Dalit autobiography, as Trivedi suggests, is to exploit the narrative possibility for a collective consciousness which will in its turn reinforce the movement for liberating the marginal from the dehumanizing experiences that the Dalits are tied with on daily basis. So, a Dalit writer has to be aware of the broader scope of representational force in writing his life narrative in which the delineation of life events has to be yoked to an end of Dalit emancipation. At this point of the writing it seems to be urgent to contest the content of Harishankar Jaladas's autobiography and understand the narrative tendency.

The narrative is delineated in twenty six chapters. And of them the first seven chapters of the narrative are about the author's forefathers and parents, the uncertainty in life after his grandfather's demise, his grandmother's struggle and parents' nuptial tie, and his formative age

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with special reference to adolescence and his peers. Needless to say, from an early time of his life his mind did not fail to appreciate what is culturally unique to his fishing community and with mixed feeling he serves those nuances. A sense of belonging is evident. Chapter eight and nine report the history of communalism in pre-Independence and post-Independence Bangladesh, marginalized attitude from the hostile literary circle, and the author's suicide thought under economic duress. Chapter ten makes an account of his motivation for doctoral thesis, casteist attitude from the West Bengal literary society, and some of his acquaintances who impacted his personal and literary life considerably.

Chapter eleven informs us of another literary figure of Bangladesh, Abu Ishaq and the author's entrance into the Dhaka based literary circle through annual *Bangla Academy Mela*. Chapter twelve is dedicated to the memory of the Uttar Patenga fishing community. Chapter thirteen informs us of the minority persecution by the goons of the then ruling party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the writer's being victimized to communal disharmony, and his resistance. Chapter fourteen recalls author's memories of puja celebration at his maternal uncle's house and offers a pragmatic discussion on the significance of puja. With the exception of chapter eighteen, chapter fifteen to chapter twenty three mostly reflect on his literary life. These chapters detail the background of his books written so far. This major focus is developed along with some of other stories of his life where the poet's modest acknowledgement for his establishment, his future literary plan, his family issues, and his sister, Tulsi's tragic death are told. In chapter nineteen the author focuses the crisis of the Hindu society which is obsessed with caste and Varna.

Having placed his sense of belonging with the Namasudras, he dissects Manusmriti or Manu Samhita, one of the first Sanskrit texts by the egoist Brahmins and which was used by the British colonial government to formulate Hindu Law. This chapter further documents his experiences of living a marginal and being untouchable. Chapter twenty four gives us an account of the author's years of teaching in different government colleges and these professional years unfold a chapter of hard facts, anxiety, humiliation, shame, stigma, comradeship, and commentary on some of his colleagues. Chapter twenty five is about his students and his self-estimation as a teacher. The last chapter of the narrative is introspective, evaluative, his avowal of commitment for the fishing community through writing, and his emphatic fascination for the Bay of Bengal, in whose side he always finds comfort.

Lived span in life and sufferings are the unifying experience for Dalit autobiography which takes a strong political stance. Served in first person 'I', the narrative focus is the larger communal self that encounters the oppressive Brahminical-Savarna system daily. The subjective position in Dalit autobiography, as Trivedi rightly notes, is fluid and multiple. Jaladas' personal life narrative does not make any significant departure from that Dalit autobiographical writing trend. Being a Dalit, the representative subjective position and the

fluid nominative attain the distinctive Dalit style in Harishankar Jaladas without surprise. This will surface once we look into the eventful Dalit life of Jaladas.

In chapter ten, the author shares an instance of marginalization by a West Bengal literary mind, Topobrato Ghosh who addresses Harishankar Jaladas as the “smelly Bangladeshi writer” (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 96), a deliberate injury hinting at his original fishing community. The author in his sarcastic retort makes the vicious Hindu upper caste politics of untouchability obvious: “No surprise that people like Topobrato Ghosh will abhor us. Because they are the followers of sage Manu! The progeny of Ballal Sen! Why on earth will they accept a writer from the so called ‘low caste’?” (96). The unpalatable personal experience is served before the readers to unmask the divisive caste discourse categorizing the sneering dominant group as ‘they’ while the Dalit author’s identity is also proudly guarded by the phrase “a writer from the so called ‘low caste’”. The construction of subjectivity and the effort to reach out to the whole community by the autobiographer are evident and the narrative does act on the promise of underlining a communal struggle against the caste oppression.

The brilliance of caste narrative is measured through its achieving a transformative power while it is narrating the life of the individual in focus only to represent all others with singular predicament in the community. Jaladas in the self-narrative does unveil some of the casteist minds to transform the humiliation into power, to reclaim the social space and to make an occasion for exposing the inanity of the educated middleclass people. In one unpleasant instance, the author’s sense of delicacy is questioned for his caste. Having been posted at Nilfamari Government College, the author bought a saree for the wife of his old colleague, Bimal Sushil. And the author’s being a fisherman was held responsible for his choice of the saree by the aforesaid colleague: “you can’t expect a fisherman’s son to have delicacy! What a choice for a saree!” (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 87).

Even a cursory reading of the statement sufficiently tells us that the ‘low caste’ stigma imported the generalized statement erasing singularity in subjective position with a tacit consent on Dalit’s insufficiency in general. However the reporting made by the author is shrewdly hitting back the society for its prejudices against the Dalit and an implication of a poverty line in humane approach essential to the desired functionality of a society as a unit is evident. Consequently the stigma about the Dalit’s low birth, the uncouthness and the unsuitability among the gentry multiply his survival challenges. The forced resignation from the post of the Headmaster at Dakkin Hali Shahar High School is another instance of prejudices to a fisherman. Even later in his teaching career in Government college in Chattogram the casteist fang was a sure experience. So when the Head of the Department, Dil Afroza, is reported to have been addressing the author unceremoniously: “Did the fisherman’s son go to class? Too much is the fisherman’s son these days. Came to teach instead of fishing” (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 103) it is evident that the impunity for such rudeness and discourtesy toward a Dalit teacher is inbuilt in the social norms which are originally and unscrupulously disseminated by

the Hindu upper caste. The shift from village to city, from fishing to teaching could not save Jaladas from humiliation since the organized system and its perpetrators are guarding the Savarna ethos the sanctity of which is subject to demoralizing the Dalits. But the reporting of Dalit plights by an autobiographer is surely an attempt to turn inside out of the morally corrupt practices of the upper caste Hindus and by doing this becomes instrumental in making Dalit awakening possible.

Dalit narrative surfaces humiliation and pain but it does so for its own politics, a politics of reclaiming the social space. Author Harishankar Jaladas chooses the moments of disgrace and shame not to draw a casual sigh rather he aims at destabilizing the notion that casteism can triumph and prevail without challenge. The repercussion by the author is intended for disturbing the upper caste sensibility proportionately. So along with unfolding the moral impoverishment of the Hindu and non-Hindu professionals, the writer further exhibits the audacious and shameless aggression of the Savarna system on a Dalit's private space. The heated conversation with Haradhon Babu is a fitting instance of reclaiming the social space not for himself but for all the Dalits in similar setting. Though Jaladas secures respectable social standing along with considerable social mobility, his 'low caste' lineage still makes him vulnerable to the casteist Haradhon Babu, a guest to a house where the author was paying a visit to on a well-wisher's request incidentally. In the course of the conversation Haradhon Babu audaciously advises the author to change his surname 'Jaladas' for enjoying a safety harbor in society: "Let me tell you, Shankar Babu, affidavit your name and that will keep your children safe from all the malice in future" (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 202). In reply to Haradhon Babu's suggestion, the author with measured theatrics silences him with a loud verbal slap:

Putting a deliberate stupidity on my face I told, "Exactly. How About Chakraborty? If I am to cheat, why not a cheat of first rate. How's that?" Now Rakhil Dash spoke up, "No problem on our side." With a composure in my voice I replied, "My name's Harishankar Chakraborty; father's name's Judhisthir Jaladas. Won't you people say then that I am a bastard? Shuktara Jaladas, wife of Judhisthir Jaladas bore a bastard child?" Saying it all I left Rakhil Babu's drawing room. (202)

The act of countering the humiliatory proposal does earn agency for a Dalit author. Noted academic Udaya Kumar analyses Suhas Palshikar's understanding of humiliation where Palshikar defines an act of humiliation half if it is not confronted by the humiliated and thereby the impossibility of agency on the part of the humiliated in the given scenario: "[A]gency is to be found in the response to humiliation, in the choice the subject makes in the face of the humiliating act" (166). Account of humiliation in Dalit literature unravels how the victimization takes place, how the victims fights back in a given humiliatory situation and how the victim eventually occupies the social space in the process of assertion. The author's agency is earned through the confrontational exchange and the humiliating experience is diluted psychically through the reporting which allows all the readers share the part of humiliation

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subjectively without robbing it of gravity. Jaladas by reporting such humiliating experience and the retort has answered for millions of Dalit who are being accommodated in his account.

The Head Master's proposal to a ninth grader Jaladas for changing his surname is a kind of cultural violence on his identity and in a critical understanding of this proposal what we trace is the working of caste hegemony realized by the dominant Hindu upper caste and a probable violence on identity. Prominent critic Gopal Guru sheds light on the interrelation between hegemony and license to violence:

Space is a culturally constructed phenomenon. Structuring and restructuring of a given space is the result of a specific action carried out by a historically dominant social group, which achieves its hegemonic purposes through a regulated exercise of civilizational violence against those social groups that are victims of this kind of violence. (82)

The social space never remains vacuum as the fight for hegemony takes place primarily here through cultural negotiations between the dominant and the subordinate groups. Caste identity marker has always been a potential means to claim the social and cultural space for the Hindu upper caste and so the divisive politics of caste marker serves as the assistive force in structuring the social space accordingly. So anyone with a scheduled 'low caste' marker runs the risk of losing the advantageous position in the space.

The Head Master's proposal can be equated to a form of violence exercised on identity and we can feel the breathing of the Savarna feudal figures at the heart of the violence. The certification of caste supremacy by the Hindu upper caste denies the Dalit with original 'low' caste marker an equal footing and thereby a life with dignity. Consequently disintegration among the Dalits as a group appears to be looming larger: "'Dey' turns 'Dutta'; 'Sarkar' becomes 'Sen', 'Das' becomes 'Dasgupta', 'Jaladas' becomes 'Sengupta' and 'Shil' becomes 'Shushil' (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 78). Being the subordinate group Dalits "...often seem to internalize a wider social evaluation of themselves as "inferior" or "second class" (Tajfel and Turner 37). So instead of feeling proud of their original birth they consider the Dalit surname as an obstruction to social mobility and survival and this accounts for why they are refashioning their identity with a compromise.

This complex psychology has presumably been energized by social pressure and an urge for ensuring social grace. But Jaladas seizes the occasion to form a critical understanding of caste oppression scripted by the dominant Hindu upper caste and challenges the status quo. His reply to the Head Master, "'Sir, I won't take peacock's feather. I will consider my life to be a success if my crow voice ever produces peacock's sound' " (*Nonajole Dubsantar* 259) is restorative in Dalit identity politics. Far from being a self-exalting voice, the author leaves a note for his fellow marginal people who are now assuming new surname to hide their caste identity. The author's conscious choice to keep his surname with his name is a direct challenge

to the upper caste Hindu sponsored framework. So, the note of hope prevails: "I hope in this low-esteemed fishing quarter there will be one who will not feel inglorious for having been born in such a family and who will write to represent the culture and philosophy of the fishing community to other communities" (259). The endnote sufficiently tells us of the hopeful author who wants to see his community to be assertive and empowered with the lineage, the Dalit identity they bear. The assertion through acknowledging one's own origin and nurturing the cultural resources are finer ways to boost community self.

Language can assure restitution forging a new space within the socio-cultural one and the Dalit autobiographers need rewrite the space with experiential authenticity. The Dalit writings have been understood as infinitely potential for its transformative power. Author Hari Shankar Jaladas is fully aware of this possibility. Stripping himself bare, the author pairs both his experience and his community in a complementary manner and remains steadfast in his commitment to the communal self which requires the narrative to suppress the authorial individual self for the larger representation of the Dalithood on the whole.

It is also imperative his experiential capital adequately transforms the narrative into a site for accommodating the underrepresented faithfully. Author Jaladas does uphold the principle throughout. His account of hostile forces scoops up certain politics at play either in collaboration with or in opposition to the long standing vicious caste system. His representational narrative further showcases his community culture and projects his literary agenda which ever voices his commitment to Dalit reality. Since casteism has "both hierarchical and territorial characteristics" (Chowdhury 6), Bangladeshi Dalits may not be invariably alike to the Indian counterpart in their lived life. However the author is alive to the potentiality of literary projection of the marginalized experiences of a Bangladeshi Dalit which can put forward a counterculture before the aggressive Brahminical normative settlement. Harishankar Jaladas' autobiography *Nonajole Dubsantar* has capitalized the narrative space to invoke all the bitter experiences, register a strong sense of communal fraternity and ensure an inclusiveness reinforcing Dalit assertion which quintessentially makes the self-narrative a Dalit autobiography.

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