


The Bengali Face in the English Mirror: Reflection of Dalit Consciousness in Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's *The Untouchable & Other Poems*

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ABSTRACT

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, who belongs to Poudra Kshatriya community, is a significant Bengali Dalit poet with a mission of establishing equality and fraternity among the people. His poetry collection *The Untouchable & Other Poems*, translated by Jaydeep Sarangi and Anurima Chanda into English, demonstrates him as a poet of Dalit consciousness. Without being violent, he raises the Dalit consciousness so that Dalits may come together and unite themselves in order to break the shackles of exploitation and oppression. He wonders how the non-Dalit authors can express the experiences of Dalits. He envisions the fourth world coming out of the darkness. He makes the untouchable Shambok his representative in voicing Dalits who have always been marginalized. He loves nature and makes her his companion and friend for sharing his feelings. He is a poet of hope and future and, so, continues to sing the song of a casteless society despite the feelings of pains, insults, and sufferings. His Bengali face reflects the Dalit consciousness in the English mirror, i.e. *The Untouchable & Other Poems*.

Keywords: *Dalit consciousness, Varna system, Translation, Untouchables, Touchables (non-dalits), Indiscrimination, Empathy, The fourth world.*

Man was not born with caste
Nobody came equipped with Brahmatya
Songs of the green on earth
Stars studded with memories
Love
But still, so many riots
So many murdered
Yet, this was not what had been promised

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Can anybody hear the trickle of tears?

That what the earth wanted to be at its inception

They did not let it happen (The Untouchable 52)

This is how Shyamal Kumar Pramanik reveals his heart's pain, his anger, his vision and the need for social reform. Pramanik, who belongs to Poudra Kshatriya community (a Scheduled caste community of West Bengal), is “an activist of the Dalit movement” with a dream of “annihilating the caste system” and longing for establishing “equality and fraternity among Indians, irrespective of their caste and religion” (“Writing Back”, The Untouchable 24). As a writer, he himself admits saying: “I write for everybody” (“Writing Back”, The Untouchable 26) and reveals his aim which, in his words, is “to create a space for (my) writings within the larger domain of Indian literature” (“Writing Back”, The Untouchable 24).

Pramanik attempts to voice, Basudhara Roy writes, “the quintessential Dalit voice characterized by rage, defiance, resilience and hope” (Contemporary Voice of Dalit 1). He knows that the caste system is a man-made system. No man, equipped with Brahmatya i.e. divinity comes here. He reveals his anger when he sees riots resulting in murder. He is bold enough to expose the indiscrimination, done in the name of caste. He becomes emotional and flexible when he asks the touchable (non-Dalits) to hear “the trickle of tears” of the untouchable (Dalits). Before tracing out the Dalit consciousness in the poetry of Pramanik, it is mandatory to have a cursory glance over the aspect of translation, particularly poetry.

Pramanik writes in Bengali. Poetry is difficult to translate because of its stylistic and linguistic patterns, but Jaydeep Sarangi and Anurima Chanda have translated Pramanik's Bengali poetry into English and made this regional poetry (Bengali) available to the readers across the globe. This translated poetry collection is titled as *The Untouchable & other Poems*, and contains 50 translated poems (23 poems translated by Sarangi and 27 by Chanda) along with four symbolical illustrations by Arpita Pandey. He is certainly a poet for everybody, not for a few. Such a poet cannot be confined to a particular regional language. His poetry has a touch of universality and, thus, has the right claim to be heard and known across the globe. This has been made possible with the help of translation, which has provided scores of alternatives to know, to identify, to understand, to recognize, to learn, and to evaluate.

A translator has to go into the very spirit of the author whom he translates. Only the translator, who is bilingual with the potential to feel and understand the culture and ethos of the author,

whom he translates, can succeed in his attempt of translation. Poetry is the most difficult form for translation because of its stylistic and linguistic paradigms that carry the cultural ethos. While translating poetry from regional into English, something is lost in the transaction, but something unique is also gained. Sreedevi K. Nair talks about the scenario of this translation when she writes:

In the case of a translation, the cause for its genesis is the existing poem. This original work stimulates the translator so much that he experiences a deep affinity for the work which in turn prompts him to create a version of that experience in his own language... It is true, that no man can think another man's thoughts or feel another man's feelings exactly and in totality, but this is not what is expected of a translator either. The basic qualification that a good translator should meet is that he should be able to peruse a literary work in such a way that he can make a sensible reading of it. (48)

When the translator translates the Dalit texts, he/she faces difficulties in creating the form of Dalit idiom that may convey the cultural ethos along with the message of protest. Sarangi and Chanda in "Notes on the Translation" admit this fact thus: "Translating Dalit texts comes with a great degree of responsibility since the purpose is never just limited to creating linguistic equivalences but also of conveying the language of protest" (14). In response to Sarangi and Chanda's "How are translating Dalit texts different from other texts?", Pramanik replies in a very candid manner.

Truly enough, translating Dalit texts is quite different from other texts. Dalit literature is a new phenomenon in the history of literature. This literature presents the suffering, revolts, negation, ethnic discovery, and agony of untouchability. Since times immemorial, Dalits have been deprived of human rights. Literature becomes a space for exposing these truths. Therefore, the cultural is deeply tied up with the political in the case of Dalit literature. Its translations too, need to serve a twofold purpose of not just getting across the literary but also the political. ("Writing Back" The Untouchable 25)

Literature is the best platform for a Dalit author who can find a space in raising his voice for the social upliftment of his oppressed class and also in demonstrating his protest as well. Pramanik writes his Bengali poems which are rich in symbols and images, "packed into an intricate pattern of meter and rhythm" resulting in the "layers of untranslatability" ("Notes on the Translation", The Untouchable 14). Both the translators Sarangi and Chanda take this challenge and find the solution to the dilemma by attempting "a literal translation at the risk of making the target poem sound awkward or a figurative translation at the risk of loosening the form" ("Notes on the Translation", The Untouchable 14). These translators, to use the words of Sreedevi K. Nair, succeed in making "a sensible reading" of Pramanik's poems.

Dalit literature is a much-contested term as it has many interpretations that create confusion so profoundly that no final verdict can be submitted. It is still yet to be decided whether Dalit literature means literature written only by Dalits or literature written by non-Dalits about Dalits. Dalit identity, M. S. Wankhede writes, lies “in the affirmation of Dalit identity by discarding the Brahminic language and symbolism” and “using their own language, idiom, metaphor and imagery” (31). Dalit literature raises a voice against the present system, keeping in view the change that will give an identity of human being to Dalits. Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, who raises his voice against the present system, is a Dalit poet for whom the word ‘dalit’ refers to “those people from the depressed classes who are exploited socially and economically on the basis of their birth, by the system of Manuism and Brahmanism as propagated under the Hindu religion” (“Writing Back”, *The Untouchable* 17).

In his poem “Descending Darkness”, Pramanik declares that the touchable (non-Dalits) cannot understand their pains and sufferings. If they write about untouchables, it cannot be genuine and authentic. They can be full of sympathy, but not of empathy. What is needed is empathy, not sympathy. When a non-Dalit writer writes about their pain, it brings no solace and results in more frustration, more isolation, and more loneliness. Pramanik leads a life of “Shudra,” which he has got as a part of his “ancestral inheritance,” the inheritance that has been “punctured with want, scorn and abuse” (*The Untouchable* 59). As a Dalit, he lives a life where there is no place for human values and human rights. This is not a question of the present time, but centuries passed while feeling “infinite pain” throughout this “fossilized” life facing “Man, his scriptures, and its constraints galore / Blind beliefs / And blindness” (*The Untouchable* 59). They live in darkness as “the sunlight never penetrates” in their lives. Sunlight is the symbol of hope which never comes to them. So, Dalits have to live in darkness, i.e., despair and frustration. They do not have even “a grain to gain” and “even a drop of water” in spite of “working unto death.” The poet in Pramanik now realizes that there is no day for Dalits and the night is long for them resulting in seeing “oppression and abuse” and living in sheer negligence. He is shocked to know how they (non-Dalits) can write stories about Dalits. By admitting this fact, he leaves the reader to consider and reconsider the question of the genuineness of the Dalit texts, written by Dalit and non-Dalit authors. Very frankly and spontaneously, he affirms:

The night here is long

Our decaying lives here see only oppression and abuse
This is the way, in sheer negligence, from dirty dustbins
We scrape out food on which we survive
They write stories on us
And more darkness descends into our lives. (The Untouchable 59)

The last two lines raise many questions related to the Dalit texts, written by non-Dalit authors. Pramanik is surprised to see the stories that are being written on the Dalits and these stories take them into the cave of darkness without any hope of light. He feels that he is “reduced to an untouchable” (The Untouchable 53) while facing the hatred of the touchable (non-Dalits) and does not know where he can rest in peace. In an interview, while responding to a question about whether a non-Dalit can write about Dalit experience, he states why a non-Dalit is not the right person to voice the Dalit experiences:

A non-Dalit can obviously write about Dalit experiences but a non-Dalit cannot reach into the depth of the Dalit experiences. The Dalits have been targeted for humiliation and oppression by the system of caste and varna through the ages. This has led to their extreme poverty, exploitation, oppression and dehumanization, not only on the personal level, but also on the level of cultural excellence and creativity. This is a lived experience that might not be available to a non-Dalit. A non-Dalit writer might write out of mere sympathy towards the Dalits, but mere sympathy cannot produce revolutionary Dalit literature. (“Writing Back”, The Untouchable 24)

People talk of improving Dalits’ lives; governments provide the facilities and run various schemes for improving their living condition while spreading education and providing employment so that they may have their identity and live with their heads up without feeling inferiority and frustration. Life is improving, but, even then, Pramanik feels something missing. Catholicity of vision is required. An attitude, replete with empathy, will bring change. The poet in Pramanik feels that though everything seems to be all right, something is missing. Why does he hesitate to face the non-Dalit boldly? Why is his heart full of pains and sufferings? Why does he sit in the turn of the road, not on the road? Where will this road take him to? Many questions strike his mind that makes him look towards the Eastern sky where, somehow, he sees something coming out of the dark.

I know
I know everything is right
Yet I didn’t face you upright
I sit in the turn of the road

Heart full of sufferings.

I look at the Eastern sky

Watch the rise of

The fourth world from the dark. (The Untouchable 27)

Pramanik talks of the fourth world that seems to be coming out of the dark. This is the fourth world of the outcastes. Suraj Yengde writes:

In addition to the uniqueness of caste being a descent-based, inherited form of inescapable discrimination, there are other types of prejudice that result in similar oppression. There is what we can call a Fourth World of outcastes around the world who have been left out of the prominent discourses and debates concerning human rights and social and economic justice. Today, there is an urgent need to identify these underprivileged groups and establish international solidarity networks. (aljazeera.com)

In the poem, “Untouchable”, Pramanik presents the ‘Untouchable’ Shambuka whose story is told in “Uttarakanda” of the Valmiki’s *Ramayan*. Shambuka performs tapas (austerities) which are meant for Brahmins, not for shudras and so is killed by Ram for restoring varnasharma dharma. Here is the complete poem, “Untouchable”:

The man runs out

To write a poem on fire

Disregarding the inequality

He runs in the main street like God

I ask him, who is he?

He relies, I’m Shambok

The Untouchable (The Untouchable 37)

Pramanik sees the mental state of Dalits in the character of Shambok. Here Shambok becomes a poet who wishes to express the pains and sufferings of the Dalits. He breaks the tradition and disregards the inequality in order to join the mainstream of the poets. The poet Pramanik wonders and asks about his identity. While relying on his capacities and potentials, this poet with the feeling of pride declares his identity saying that he is Shambok, the Untouchable. The capital letter in ‘Untouchable’ is a declaration of Shambok’s pride and responsibility which he takes in voicing Dalits who have always been marginalized. Velcheru Narayan Rao has sympathy with Shambuka and, thus, raises questions: “Why can’t Shambuka perform austerities for his own spiritual liberation? Why should such practices be protected as the exclusive right of Brahmins? (161). In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar also points out the

story of Shamuka and while criticizing the varna theory, he adds: “You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole” (44).

Pramanik sees the condition of the untouchables who live in the “dilapidated houses” while facing hunger, disrespect, injustice, and oppression. They continue to struggle for their survival while singing the “song of breaking shackles” (The Untouchable 42). They do not have anyone whom they can trust. They have to live in desolation and isolation without getting love and bonding from anywhere. They love night which seems better as it, at least, provides solace of dreams. When Pramanik observes the condition of the Dalits, he becomes so emotional that he bursts out with these words:

No light,
No wind flowing freely—
Love, Bonding,
Nothing!
Now night seems better
Surrounded with dreams. (The Untouchable 55)

The poet in Pramanik uses the personal tone and shares that he has come from the backward village. It is really painful that he has not “even a small piece of land” (The Untouchable 69) which may belong to him. He walks here and there and always remains in search of his face, i.e. his identity. Both of his hands have “the scars of bondage” (The Untouchable 65). The poet feels that he does not belong here and realizes that “pain and tears” along with “hunger and hate” are in his share. He becomes strong enough to declare while addressing his homeland saying: “Here I stand facing life and death / Here I rise up to stand against my enemies / Let me scream out my story” (The Untouchable 65). His story is not the story, but it is the tale of the lived experiences which he has experienced while facing life. He has seen the oppression and the exploitation from the hands of non-Dalits who have destroyed not only their houses but their lives along with their dreams. Holi is a festival which is played with colours. But, their lives have never been colourful as the touchable (non-Dalits) have poured the colour of blood. The poet in Pramanik feels anger within and when this anger gets violent, he bursts out in a caustic tone to the extent that he begins to curse them and predict their future thus:

They who had destroyed our houses
They who had destroyed our lives
 Played Holi with our blood
And they, who did not speak
 They saw but did not see
To them I say—Listen, you were not true to your world
 Caged within yourselves, you are,
 And blind
Your destruction is inevitable. (The Untouchable 74)

Pramanik loves nature—nature that becomes his friend with whom he shares his feelings when he feels lonely and isolated. Bashundhara Roy, while analysing Pramanik’s poems, traces out that “For Pramanik, nature is both companion and refuge. It is a repository of memories, wisdom, healing, and hope” (95). Pramanik’s birthday falls in the month of Ashar. He comes in touch with nature and is lost while staring the objects related to nature. He is so much engrossed in nature that he forgets himself and the feeling for which he stands. How spontaneously he reveals his love for nature!

Ashar month
Is my birth month
When clouds gather, I stand
 On the fields
 It rains
Before I understand for which feeling I stand here. (The Untouchable 38).

He observes the field which seems to be “filled with memories” (The Untouchable 75). He does not wish to go anywhere and, so, recalls his past that takes him to “memory” that “encircles childhood river” (The Untouchable 79). To him, “clouds are sprinkling water with its wings” (77). He feels that “the mad air flows” which symbolizes that “a storm will come” (The Untouchable 64). He feels himself dejected to the extent that his feelings are reflected in the air that also seems to be “full of hatred and antagonism” (The Untouchable 30). He shares his feeling with nature and nature also consoles him. He loves nature so profoundly that he feels that his “whole heart is a rice field” (The Untouchable 43).

Both the translators—Sarangi and Chanda have shown their talent in translating the very idiom of Pramanik who makes a good use of the selected phraseology, figures and imagery. Phrases like “memories of mothers” (The Untouchable 33), “boiling blood” (The Untouchable 54), “rain-soaked air” (The Untouchable 54), “depth of darkness” (The Untouchable 70), “depths of death” (The Untouchable 72), etc. are striking and thought-provoking. Figures like ‘Simile’, ‘Metaphor’ and ‘Personification’ appear here and there in his poetry. For instance:

Simile:

The river is like a yellow bird (The Untouchable 43)

Metaphor:

See, my whole heart is a rice field (The Untouchable 43)

Fusion of Personification and Simile:

Time walks away, rapidly shifting lanes,

Like a breath half-taken (The Untouchable 64)

Lines like “Only dark pains everywhere” (The Untouchable 46) and “a wondrous worldly life emerging out of destruction” (The Untouchable 49) strike the heart of the reader who also feels the same feelings that arise in the heart of the poet. ‘Ashar’, ‘Brahmatya’, ‘Brahmin’, ‘Chaitra’, ‘Kalpurush’, ‘Sanatan’, ‘Shudras’ etc. are some untranslatable words which are given with their meanings in “Glossary” at the end of the poetry collection.

While discussing the Dalit experiences in Pramanik’s poetry, Basudhara Roy writes: “Pramanik’s poems, by envisioning a more equitable world for himself and his descendants, lays down the architecture of a more inclusive and tolerant world order and though the goal may not be achieved any soon, the faith in the journey can help expedite the change” (97). What makes Pramanik different from other Dalit authors is his way of expression in a recommendable tone. This is the tone which never becomes violent and destructive. Even when he curses and talks of destruction, he only hints and speaks in a sarcastic and metaphorical tone that has more force than the abusive and scatological tone, which create a feeling of hatred. He is a poet of hope and future. Present may seem to be dark, but future will be full of light. Light is the light of hope. The poet, despite the feelings of pain and insult, stands with hope, and continues to sing “the morning song” of hope. He believes that the night may be long, but it will give place to the morning. That is why he, while facing the night, hopes for the morning that will bring a society which will be casteless. Pramanik writes:

As I inhale the smell of the earth, I feel the pain

Stand near wounded time

So much restlessness, insult

I am tired, yet sing will I the morning song (The Untouchable 75)

It is Pramanik who, without being violent, raises the Dalit consciousness so that the Dalits may come together, and their togetherness will unite them to the extent that they will work together in order to break the shackles of exploitation and oppression. What Suraj Yengde says is quite applicable in the case of Pramanik. “The oppressed castes need to come under one roof to develop a collective egalitarian vision for the future of the world. Coming together and working collectively is the only way in which we can break the bonds of oppression” (Aljazeera.com). The Bengali poet Pramanik shares the Dalit consciousness with the Marathi poet Namdeo Dhasal who seems to be shaking hands with him when they talk of the society where there will be no discrimination on the basis of caste and class. But they differ in their approach. Namdeo Dhasal becomes somewhat violent and uses abusive words like “Away, away you daughterfucker, / You fistfucker, you shithead, you jerk, / You pedigreed bastard” (Namdeo Dhasal 46) while talking of setting “the whole world on fire.” But Pramanik remains calm, considers the adverse circumstances, and does not talk of making an end of the whole world. He moves ahead though he is affected, and his face is “burnt in fire.” He feels that “a stubborn warrior rises up” (The Untouchable 62) in his heart. He wakes up and determines to “light the torch now / with enclosed fists” while descending in this darkness. In a very real sense, Pramanik is “a socially-committed artist” who shows us “a better society—one that is based on justice, equality, and fraternity instead of discrimination” (The Untouchable 90).

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