

Decoding the Migration, Rehabilitation, and the Impact of Caste in the Lives of Bengali Dalit Women Strata in the post-Partition Bengal: Revisiting Kalyani Thakur Charal's Autobiographical Narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, and Novella *Andhar Bil*

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Abstract

Based on the reading of Kalyani Thakur Charal's notable autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (*Why I Sign as Charal*, 2016) and novella *Andhar Bil* (2016), this paper intends to analyze the experiences of second-generation Bengali Dalit women refugees in case of the post-Partition West Bengal. The present paper examines the tropes of nostalgia, partition, and rehabilitation as experiences of Bengali Dalit women characters in the post-Partition West Bengal, the notions of migration, remembrance, oppression, and injustice. Through a detailed analysis of both the narratives, this research article intends to explore how the intersectional dynamism of caste, and gender have impacted the experiences of Bengali Dalit women strata substantially. In majoritarian aspects Bengali Dalit women characters have been reduced to mute objects, stripped of their agency, subjecthood, and desires, from which these two narratives shift substantially.

In case of the post-Partition scenario of West Bengal, the experiences of refugees from the different sections of the society are not a homogenized one. Kalyani Thakur's narratives offer some valuable points for thinking about the differentiated experiences of migration, displacement, deprivation, and caste discrimination faced by Bengali Dalit women characters. Through her autobiographical narrative and the novella *Andhar Bil*, Kalyani Thakur also tries to portray how the intersectional dynamism of caste and gender has problematized the overall experiences of the Bengali Dalit populace in the post-Partition West Bengal. The researcher wants to argue that ideas like caste and gender both act as a site of oppression, which the grand narrative of the Bengal partition is primarily unable to capture. To develop this paper, the researcher consults literary, historical, and sociological facets of the Bengal Partition of 1947, Dalit identity, migration, and its effects on the Bengali Dalit population.

Keywords: *Dalit, Bengali Dalit women, post-partition times, caste, gender, intersectionality, migration, rehabilitation.*

Introduction

To unravel the socio-casteist dynamics and its mechanism in the newly formed state of West Bengal, it's crucial to recognize the geo-political shiftings the state has faced due to the Partition of India in 1947. Due to the Partition of India in 1947, two states of the Indian Union,

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Punjab and Bengal, were divided. Some portions of Punjab went to the West Pakistan (now Pakistan), and some portions of Bengal went to the newly formed East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and the rest of the part became a new state of India named West Bengal. In the aftermath of Partition, the newly formed India was entangled with the issues of division of the provinces, cross-border migration, and acute immigration of the refugees from the newly formed nation-states.

Now the migration scenario of West Bengal was not as same as that of the migration framework of Punjab region. Because in case of West Bengal, arrival of the refugee populace took place in several waves. In this regard, historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Choudhury suggests, “the first wave of refugees mainly consisted of the more wealthy classes, mostly upper caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes with jobs,...” (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Choudhury 3). So, in case of the first phase of Partition immigration, the lower caste Bengali Dalit populace, consisting mainly of the Namasudra population, failed to migrate to West Bengal due to the lack of resources and social capital. But the growing communal violence, riots, and growing problems in East Pakistan forced the Bengali Dalit populace to migrate to West Bengal. Regarding the scenario of second wave of refugee influx, historians suggest, “at the Bongaon railway station, the first batch of Namasudra refugees of about 500 families arrived in the first week of January 1950, and since then, thousands of them began to arrive every day” (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Choudhury 4). The notion of refugeehood is concretely attached to the ideas of migration, displacement, trauma, and cross-border immigration, which eventually lead to uprooted lives in the continuous flux of struggle. Suffering under the severe situations of loss of a homeland, socio-economic upheavals, the refugee strata often suffer from existential and identity crises. However, after the commencement of Partition, the experiences of the refugees are not homogenous one because the contours of class, caste, and gender identity have critically shaped the intricate affairs of the Bengali Dalit refugees. In this regard Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury aptly suggests, “the Partition ‘refugees’ in India—referred to in official records as ‘Displaced Persons’ (DPs)—never represented a homogenous category. United in shared pain of displacement, they were differentiated by the heterogeneity of experiences of rehabilitation. And here caste, class, and the associated values of social and cultural capital played a large part” (Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Choudhury 118), which eventually contributes and shaped the differentiated narratives of post-Partition migration scenario.

In the case of the Bengal partition scholarship, the eminent authors have recurrently talked about the partition crises, the scenario of migration, the situation of suffering, rehabilitation, and government policy. Be it Sunil Ganguly's notable *Purbo-Paschim* (2000) and *Arjun* (1987) or Atin Bandyopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khonje* (1977); it provides the standpoint of middle-class bhadralok immigrants. Their creative renderings actually, "center on the fall of the middle-class émigrés and their resurgence through sheer talent, courage, and hard work, all of which define the narrative voice by its East Bengali bhadralok-ness" (Banerjee 553). This kind of narrative lacks in case of understanding the heterogeneity of refugee experiences, which gets changed on the basis of social, economic, and cultural capital as well as according to one's caste identity. To analyze the contours of Bengal partition scholarship holistically, it is necessary to understand the Bengali Dalit refugees' standpoint as well as subjectivity from the core. Interestingly, in case of the first half of the twenty-first century, when the second-generation Dalit evacuees' started writing about their experience regarding the post-partition scenario of West Bengal, it contradicts the elitist and nostalgic platitudes of mainstream partition narratives. But in a fascinating manner, in those narratives of Bengali Dalit scholarship, the question of gender did not get much attention, which needs to be analyzed critically. Now the conceptualization of 'Dalit' and 'Women' are mutually exclusive. To understand the Bengali Dalit refugees' experience, it is essential to decipher how the intersectional correlation among caste, gender, and refugee identity shaped the experiences of Bengali Dalit women. The narrative of Bengali Dalit women can be considered within the dominating grand macro-narratives of partition, the "common minimal narratives" (Kaur 283). The notions of migration, displacement, rehabilitation, and the question of survival, are the paramount factors that have shaped the lives of the East Pakistani refugees in the newly formed West Bengal. The caste factor has seriously influenced all these facets. The caste identity is associated with a sense of belonging and works as a marker that from which strata of the society one actually belongs. Anupama Rao suggests caste as, religio-ritual form of personhood, a social organization of the world through the phenomenology of touch, an extension of the concept of stigma from the facticity of biological bodies to metaphorical collectivities such as the body politic, and most importantly, it is an apparatus that regulates sexuality (Rao 5). Contemporary studies on post-Partition Bengal scenario, focused on the caste factor critically, and provides the insight that, "caste identity during that period has been rephrased into the rhetoric of violence and resistance, with more emphasis on displacement and refugee struggle than on caste" (Bandyopadhyay 456). But in an exciting manner, the perspective of Bengali

Dalit refugee women often got neglected. The caste-gender factor and the Bengali Dalit women's subjectivity did not get the proper attention from the scholars. This research would like to focus on the point of view of Bengali Dalit women in case of post-partition West Bengal and how the notions of migration, displacement, and rehabilitation have affected their scope of survival, with a particular reference to Kalyani Thakur Charal's autobiographical narrative, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi (Why I Write Charal)* (2016) and her novella *Andhar Bil* (2019).

The notion of migration is critically related with the post-partition rehabilitation scenario, and in most of the cases the sense of nostalgia works in case of the selection of the site of rehabilitation. In the ambit of autobiographical narrative, factuality related to one's life events and sequential progression of the events became the central focal point of the narrative. Writing an autobiographical narrative includes crucial responsibilities towards the subjects involved in the narrative like close familial members, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and even cultural sections. In case of autobiographical narrative, it is complicated to infuse the imaginative stance of an author with the actual life events for a nuanced understanding of the theme. This is the point from where autobiographical fiction emerges. In this regard, Alberta Natasia Adji suggests, "a distinct separation often exists between lived experiences as fact and novel as fiction, and at this point the autobiographical novelist must interrupt, to blur the divisions, with the conviction that it is possible to create something subtle and intense that will fill in the blanks from the lived reality or the historical event" (Adji 3). This research article intends to analyze the notions of migration, rehabilitation and the experiences of Bengali Dalit women strata in the post-Partition West Bengal. To understand the various factors related with their experiences holistically, the researcher has chosen Charal's autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* as well as her novella *Andhar Bil* which is extensively influenced by her autobiographical narrative.

Kalyani Thakur Charal, a staunch Bengali Dalit feminist and an ace writer from the Bengali Dalit literary canon, was born and brought up in a Namasudra family at Bagula of the Nadia district in the year 1965. Recently, she has co-edited a notable collection containing several writings of Bengali Dalit women writers, titled *Dalit Lekhika: Women's Writings from Bengal* (2020) with Dr. Sayantan Dasgupta. For more than a decade now, she has been editing a vernacular journal named *Nir (Nest)*, through which she demonstrates several issues regarding Dalit women, Matua faith, water crises, and refugee issues. The idea of double marginalization through caste and gender-centric issues is closely associated with the identity of Dalit women in general. But what makes the case different for Charal is the after-effect of Partition, the sense

of uprootedness and loss of a homeland, and most importantly, settling down and growing up in a new country. Charal's autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and novella *Andhar Bil* portray the scenario, diverse experiences, and challenges faced by Bengali Dalit women strata in the post-partition West Bengal from the perspectives of Kalyani and Kamalini. Now Kamalini, who is the central protagonist of the novella *Andhar Bil* and her point of view concerning the sufferings of Bengali Dalit refugee strata tries to illustrate "the memory of memories of the second-generation refugees of the East not only about the traumatic experiences of the Partition and its aftermath but also about the pleasing and prosperous past in East Bengal" (Sinha, 2022, pp.3). Analyzing both narratives side by side will provide us with a stance through which we can understand the sufferings as well as the dynamic experiences of the Bengali Dalit community in the post-partition scenario.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's Writings *Ami Keno Charal Likhi and Andhar Bil* : An Understanding

The same author, Kalyani Thakur Charal, writes the two texts taken for discussion in this research article. The first one is her autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, first published in 2016, and the second one is a novella written by her *Andhar Bil* first published in 2019. In Charal's autobiographical narrative, she herself as a first-person narrator, demonstrates what it was like to be growing up in the post-Partition West Bengal. Though Charal did not face the pangs of partition herself, it has a wide-ranging impact on her life and her family. Hailing from the eastern side of Bengal, which became East Pakistan then (now Bangladesh), Charal's family faced the Partition of 1947, and later her father moved to West Bengal. The primary motive behind selecting these two texts is that, in case of Charal's autobiographical narrative, Charal chronologically and sequentially portrayed the events which have shaped her life in post-Partition West Bengal. Charal has portrayed that, after the Partition of the country her father along with other acquaintances left his native land (East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh) and come to West Bengal. Charal's autobiographical narrative provides the standpoint of a second-generation refugee women who herself have not faced the Partition, but her entire childhood shaped through the narratives of Partition told by her father and the discussion regarding their idyllic lost desh. In case of the novella *Andhar Bil*, through the character Kamalini, who is actually the alter ego of Kalyani herself, the writer demonstrates her inner realisations, experiences of pleasure and pain and how after losing their homeland an entire community's survival depends on the mighty water body named *Andhar Bil*. Analyzing *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and *Andhar Bil* is necessary and crucial because these two narratives,

provides us the opportunity to understand the complexities of experiences which the Bengali Dalit strata have encountered after migrating to West Bengal.

The narrative starts from the nascent phase of her childhood and gradually develops through the discussion regarding the experiences faced by the Bengali Dalit strata in the post-Partition West Bengal and how the refugee populace has settled themselves in this new land. Charal's narrative is significant on so many fronts because it also provides the struggles and sufferings of a second-generation Bengali Dalit girl who aspires to become independent and established in post-Partition West Bengal. In case of the novella *Andhar Bil*, it's the fictional narrative heavily influenced by the autobiographical narrative that provides a broader scope for the narrator to illustrate various aspects of one's life infused with a bit of imagination and personal realisation. It's an autobiographical fiction centering on the character Kamalini, who actually represents the author herself, viz-a-viz Kalyani. These two texts provide a minute and significant portrayal of a notable event in South Asian history which has shaped the lives of thousands of Bengali Dalit people. Creating a semblance between the narratives of the lost homeland which Kalyani hears from her father and the narrative of *Andhar Bil*, the picture becomes clear that how the process of rehabilitating in the newly formed West Bengal becomes difficult for the Bengali Dalit strata. In both the narratives the characters from the Bengali Dalit strata are haunted by the attachments, memories and nostalgia associated with their former homeland. Regarding the comparison of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) viz-a-viz their former desh and the newly formed state West Bengal, the characters from the *Andhar Bil* suggests, no, matter what you say, there is a difference of heaven and hell between that country and this one. Can the water of the Madhumati and that of *Andhar Bil* be the same? Look at what the haat of Naldi was and what the one at the Duttability is! It's all luck. Now tell me, shall we go back if we are not rehabilitated? Soteka replies, what we've left is left forever (Charal, 2022, pp. 8).

Partition, Migration, and the Loss of Homeland

The portrayal and impact of Partition in Charal's narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (Why I Write Charal) (2016) differs from that of the other Bengali Dalit partition narratives. Because as a second-generation Bengali Dalit child born after the Partition in 1965, she herself did not experience the Partition personally, but her childhood was concretely shaped by the narratives of Partition, which she heard through her father's descriptions. Youngest among the five children of Krishna Chandra Thakur, it is the inherited memory of Charal, which she receives

through the narrative depiction of her father's migration to West Bengal, primarily in 1948-1949, and his subsequent settlement at Bagula of Nadia district in 1954. Charal's narrative tries to unravel the dynamics of the tussle between the sentiment of nostalgia regarding the lost desh and the sense of the suffering of the displaced Bengali Dalit populace from East Pakistan. Thus Charal's narrative concentrates on two different selves of partition—" an imagined homeland without territoriality and an inherited memory without direct knowledge" (Butalia xi). Similarly, being the central protagonist of the narrative *Andhar Bil*, Kamalini also heard several heart-wrenching stories about partition and migration and her childhood being impacted by these stories. Kalyani to Kamalini, this transitional shift provides the authoress the chance to infuse imagination to her real-life events, which helps her to portray the sense and sensibilities of a Bengali Dalit girl who was born and brought up in post-Partition West Bengal and whose family faced partition.

Caste act as a crucial component in the post-Partition rehabilitation politics of West Bengal. At one side, the upper caste *bhadralok* refugee strata in 1949 resettled themselves in squatter colonies in and around the capital, Calcutta (now Kolkata) with their resources, social capital and kin-group support as well as the government's endorsement of the rehabilitation scheme and on the contrary the Bengali Dalit refugees, in a stark contrast, were meted out a completely different treatment, as having no resources and social capital; they were either forced to the various transit camps or pushed to live in the outskirts of the city even outside of the state (Chatterjee 94).

But Charal's narrative regarding post-Partition rehabilitation is not that of a usual rendering of the camp-life scenario. Charal's father, like many other *Namasudra* acquaintances, settled in the borderlands of the Nadia district. First of all, the geographical space near the borderlands has some sort of semblance with the cultivable lands of their lost homeland, which they have left behind. In the initial phases of partition, many refugees thought that once the communal violence got over, they could go back to their homeland, so in that regard also, the borderland was the foremost priority for them. Secondly, living in the border area also creates a sense of the nostalgia for their lost desh in their minds. One of the central reasons for settling down at Nadia's Bagula was the existence of *Andhar Bil* (a large natural water body). Coming from the Eastern Bengal, which was having a strong riverine delta system the lives of Bengali Dalit refugee strata were concretely dependant on cultivation. So, after migrating to West Bengal, they wanted to settle in a place resembling their lost desh. Here, in these two narratives, *Andhar Bil* becomes the crucial connecting link which connects the renderings of Kalyani and

Kamalini. Even in case of the novella *Andhar Bil*, Kamalini's father commented that the water body can provide them food items like fish, nal, shaluk, and ghechu with traditional kind of paddies like Jagli and Chingrhebhushi which became the basis of their survival. In Kamalini's narrative, the bil named *Andhar*, which is a water body basically associated with the existence of the Bengali Dalit strata because coming from the *sujola* (watery), *sufola* (productive), and *sosyo shyamola* (green with crops) East Bengal their lives were heavily dependent on a water body with which their livelihood also substantially linked.

Charal, through her accounts, tries to unravel how the Bengali Dalit refugees, who were settled away from Kolkata, have managed to resettle themselves in this part of the land. Charal's father demonstrates to her daughter how belligerent this host nation was actually, they realized when people like them first came to the new country. The notion of caste segregation got clear from the spatial discrimination which Charal presented in her rendering, all the Brahmins, Kayasthas and some of the Goalas—Acharya, Ganguly, Mukherjee, Dey, Dutta, Kundu, Bhowmik, Sen, Chakraborty, Ghosh—had brick houses and they lived near the market and railway station. They were the original inhabitants of this place. And the rest was the *Namasudras* who lived near the *beel* (swamp) as their traditional occupation was cultivation. We suffered an inferiority complex when someone called this place as *beelpara* ('para' in Bengali means village). (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 12–13).

Similar sorts of rendering are also visible in Kamalini's narrative also. Being the central protagonist of the narrative, Kamalini portrays how caste discrimination worked in their lives: That year I went with dada, big brother, to work on sawing trees. After the work, I was so hungry that I could have eaten a mountain of rice. A woman from the family was serving the rice, but she would throw it down from such a height, must have been one and half cubits. Some of the rice scattered around (Charal 96).

From these lines, we got an idea of how the people from the Bengali Dalit strata were being subjected to and treated by the upper caste people on the basis of their caste identity. The spatial segregation on the basis of caste in the case of the upper caste people and Bengali Dalit refugee strata is vehemently visible from the instance that in the entire narrative, the identity of Kamalini along with her people was portrayed through their caste identity and with the matter of fact that they lived adjacent to the *Andhar Bil* only, they did not have an individual identity of their own--- “a football match is to happen between *bil parha* and the western *parha*. The boys who will play for *bil parha* have their home surrounded by the *Andhar Bil* only” (*Andhar Bil*, Charal 28). Though written as a short novella, this bio-fiction portrays the scenario of how

the children of the Bengali Dalit refugee populace got discriminated with other children. In the school, they were recognized as children of bil para (the area associated with the Andhar Bil), which according to Kalyani viz-a-viz Kamalini, is derogatory. This systematic spatial segregation reminds us of the system of outcasting of the Dalit populace outside the territory of the main city, like pariahs. This systematic cornering of the Bengali Dalit populace from the main parts of the settlement evokes a sense of unbelonging as well as uprootedness for the Bengali Dalit migrants during the process of their rehabilitation in post-Partition scenario. The spatial difference regarding the living places of upper caste people and the Bengali Dalit populace in the outskirts of the locality creates a sense of suffering in “the lived experience of caste as a spatial sensory order” (Lee 481).

Charal’s narratives provide a distinct perspective regarding the ideas of migration, displacement, rehabilitation, and nostalgia after the Partition of 1947. Charal’s autobiographical narrative is not a stereotypical representation of a camp life, which the Bengali Dalit refugees have encountered in most of the cases. On the contrary, Charal’s account sheds light on the other lot of the refugee stratum who have tried to settle themselves in the marshy borderland areas of the districts which are distant from the capital, Kolkata. On the other hand, the rendering of Andhar Bil exemplifies the story of deported human beings and how the Bengali Dalit refugee strata have settled themselves up on the marshy lands of Andhar Bil in the post-Partition scenario. Hierarchical disjuncture based on caste, loss of a homeland, spatial segregation, lack of social capital, cultural antagonism in West Bengal, and their refugee-vagabond identity to the state apparatus all these critical factors contributed immensely to the suffering of the Bengali Dalit strata. The spatial insecurity concerning the loss of a homeland and gaining it again and the subsequent settlement in the host nation also left some refugees in complete wreck. In her narrative, Charal suggests, Charal’s maternal uncles made three attempts to go to East Bengal in search of ‘homeland’ which proved futile, and they ultimately returned and settled down here with an impoverished condition as they had already sold their homestead in West Bengal with a hope that they would be able to live in their ‘desh’ (original homeland) (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 16).

Followed by this kind of similar incidents, many refugees from the Bengali Dalit strata were often accused as miscreants and delinquents by the state apparatus. Even in case of Kamalini’s narrative also, many people from her Bil Para went to Dandakaranya to settle themselves there, but unable to cope up with the inhospitable situations of the territory they were forced to come back in West Bengal. Kamalini in Andhar Bil narrates, The elder brother of Sardar Moshai is

also going to Dandakaranya..... He'll go to Mana Camp. What will he live on there? The only thing that grows there is corn, nothing else. You've left one country and come to another, and again to leave this place! What a fate! (Andhar Bil, Charal 12).

From these two narratives, this idea became clear that rehabilitation scenario after being displaced from their native land became a harsh phase of Bengali Dalit refugees' lives. Regarding the conception of migration, some scholars have commented that, “[t]he human story is a migration story. We all are, or have been migrants, immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers” (Maruskin 77). Cutting across the contours of caste, class, and gender Charal's autobiographical narrative and the novella *Andhar Bil*, provide critical insights regarding the migration journey of the Bengali Dalit populace. Pointing out about the condition of Bengali Dalit women strata, these two narratives demonstrates in the post-Partition rehabilitation scenario in West Bengal what kind of suffering Bengali Dalit refugee women have to encounter to settle themselves up in this newer host nation. The pan-Indian Dalit feminist movement indulges itself to understand the complex intricacies of caste and gender entangled with the various notions of class, religion and community. In this regard, Anandita Pan suggests, “intersectional Dalit Feminism highlights how Dalit women are erased/ignored by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, and how the constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ give prominence to savarna women and dalit men” (Pan 23). But Kalyani Thakur Charal's narratives help us to understand how the ideas of caste and gender got intermingled with the refugee identity and how it has immensely contributed to the post-Partition rehabilitation scenario of West Bengal.

Devoid of the social and economic capital it is very hard for the Bengali Dalit inhabitants in the post-Partition West Bengal to settle themselves up. Charal's narratives also portray the suffering regarding the cultural antagonism which the Bengali Dalit strata have faced from the original inhabitants of West Bengal. Their actual belonging from the East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh), their caste identity, and the usage of Bangal dialect (a form of Bengali language prevalent in East Pakistan) are the factors which contributed immensely in case of their facing cultural hostility. Now, in this scenario, it became very difficult for the Bengali Dalit people to acquire education and establish themselves in the mainstream society because the dominant section of the society already possessed all the four capitals of the society namely- “social, economic, cultural, and symbolic” (Bourdieu 243). Charal, in both narratives, portrayed the suffering of her people, in her autobiographical narrative she narrates, most of the higher caste (upper caste) children went to boys' and girls' school respectively. We who were small in

number took admission in a school of our locality because, first of all, we don't have to spend money to buy our uniform and secondly, the higher caste children would often humiliate us with derogatory remarks like 'beelpara group', even the 'pure' Brahmin teacher, Asim Moitra insulted us openly in our class" (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 24–25).

Similarly, in the case of Andhar Bil, Kamalini portrays:

Shila, Mani and other girls of upper caste don't go to the fields to collect snails or cut grass or pick up goja. That activity is for the children of the Bilparha. Shila and Mani's families have houses made of brick, businesses in manure and seeds, warehouses full of jutes. They don't have to do these things (Andhar Bil, Charal 116).

These are the obstacles which the Bengali Dalit strata have to encounter after migrating to West Bengal, and these adverse situations contributed immensely to the insecurity for education in the mind of the Bengali Dalit strata, which eventually became the reason for their economic destitution. Charal's narrative not only focuses on the tropes of migration, displacement, loss of a homeland, and nostalgia regarding the former desh but also minutely depicts the complex scenario of rehabilitation and her own fight for establishment in the post-Partition West Bengal.

From Kalyani to Kamalini: Life in Post-Partition West Bengal

Charal's autobiographical narrative is one among the rudimentary narrative of its sort, which has unraveled various complexities and different aspects of the lives of the Bengali Dalit women strata that what kind of experiences they have after the dislocation of 1947. Regarding the experiences of the women during the times of Partition and post-Partition scenario, Urvashi Butalia commented, "and for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job it is to painfully build a future from the ashes" (Butalia WS-13). This line is aptly applicable in the case of Kalyani Thakur Charal's rendering. From a second-generation child born after Partition to a destitute Bengali Dalit parent to get education in the converse situations and finally establishing herself as an independent earning woman, Charal has crossed a prolonged as well as tough roads of life. In her novella Andhar Bil also the central protagonist Kamalini have to leave her village to fulfil her future aspirations. In this narrative Charal portrays, Kamalini had to leave her birthplace, her village of childhood to make herself educate enough from the institutions of city space and then the narrator (third person) who is the author herself narrates:

Kamal sets out to enter into her city life or an endless life of vagabond, leaving her village. Forests, rivers, lakes, lotus of the lake, snail, oyster, green grass of the fields, which she has left behind, will call her to come back for rest of the life; whereas Kamalini has to be confined within the entangled web of concretes in city life as being a civilized citizen (Andhar Bil, Charal 133).

From Kalyani to Kamalini, the manifestation of the authorial intent is clear from the point that in both the narratives the central lady protagonist hailing from the Bengali Dalit strata have to leave their home, their closed ones to get higher education which will help them to establish themselves as independent women in near future. Negating the societal stratification based on caste, these two characters through their agential stance tried to break the caste shackles to live an egalitarian life. Regarding the idea of caste, Surinder S. Jodhka and Jules Naudet suggest, “caste is a closed system of hierarchy, unique to South Asia, which presumably tied everyone to the social collective that they were born into, with no individual choice of occupation, mobility, or marriage” (23). This is the understanding regarding the caste which the characters like Kalyani and Kamalini defied to obey.

Around the 1980s, Charal left her native place, Bagula, and shifted to Kolkata for higher education, these experiences have shaped the narrative of *Andhar Bil* also. Kamalini, who is the alter-ego of the author herself also have to leave her native place for her further education. But in this process how much Kamalini has suffered presents the inherent pain of the author herself. Charal got a government job in the railway department during her graduation days only. Beforehandedly, Charal and her family have faced spatial segregation in their native place in terms of their caste. But interestingly, in an urban metropolis like Kolkata and even in the professional space, Charal has become a victim of oppression due to her caste and gender identity. In the initial days of office, Charal has faced so many belittling questions:

Mrs. Bose asked about the minute details regarding my family background, specifically the educational qualification. Mr. Dey and Mr. Bhattacharya were curious to know from which caste I belong. I replied, ‘Charal’. They were surprised to hear my response. Because they were not habituated to hear my caste openly, which they consider as cuss words (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 82).

In case of the novella *Andhar Bil*, though Charal stopped the narrative on the particular point where Kamalini is preparing herself to leave her home for the city but through various instances, she established the point that how Kamalini and the girls from the Bengali Dalit strata have been subjugated on the basis of their identity. In one of those instances, Kamalini as the mouthpiece of Kalyani suggests, “..., none of the upper caste teacher’s children goes to the bil to fish. They cannot even swim. They lead a somewhat urban life” (*Andhar Bil*, Charal 117). These instances worked as an evidence for the subjugated experiences of the Bengali Dalit women strata and their suffering in the post-Partition West Bengal.

Some factors contributed immensely to Kalyani’s establishment as an independent woman. The liberal approach of Dalit patriarchy (Ilaiyah 39–42) and the influence of Matua movement leaders Harichand and Guruchand Thakur’s advocacy for women’s equality and significance

of education became the source of inspiration for the Namasudra women strata. The impact of Matua Mahasangha, the doctrines of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, and the encouragement of Charal's father, Krishna Chandra Thakur became the driving factor behind her success. Charal demonstrates how her father encouraged others in their village to respect women and often said: "there is no difference between my sons and daughters, they are all alike" (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 18). In a similar manner, in Kamalini's case also the role as well as the impact of education is immense. We can draw a parallelism between the characters of Krishna Chandra Thakur (Kalyani's father) and Sukhamoy (Kamalini's father). In a similar manner, Sukhomoy, like Kalyani Thakur Charal's father, is a staunch propagator of education and men-women equality. In Andhar Bil, Sukhomoy proclaims, "my daughters do all kinds of work, they can do all the things that boys do. These days girls are just like boys" (Andhar Bil, Charal 73). Regarding the Dalit feminist standpoint in Dalit women's autobiographies, Anandita Pan suggests, "by establishing dalit women's identity as that which is affected by mutual and intersecting structures of caste/and gender, dalit women's autobiographies highlight the dalit feminist identification of the constituency, that is, dalit woman, as a specific category" (Pan 97). Here Charal's autobiography becomes the base source on the basis of which the author also demonstrates the experiences of Kamalini who is the alter-ego of Kalyani. So, from Kalyani Thakur Charal's autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and novella *Andhar Bil*, this point becomes clear that at least some people from the Bengali Dalit strata understand the importance of education to establish themselves in the society. In the case of Kalyani, as well as Kamalini's case, education becomes the medium that helps them to fight against the intersectional subjugation of caste-gender identity.

In an interesting manner, Charal's autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and her short novella *Andhar Bil* provide a counter-dynamic to the established mainstream discourse of the post-Partition narratives. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 not only brought the suffering but also became a scope of emancipation for the refugee women strata by loosening the shackles of patriarchal subjugation to fulfill the family's economic needs and for the betterment of the familial destitute situation. After migrating to West Bengal, the Namasudra strata, which consists of the majority of the Bengali Dalit population, realized that without education, they will be unable to upgrade their situation from the economic destitution. So, education can be the tool which act as a catalyzer in case of the betterment of the situation of the Bengali Dalits. Though in case of *Andhar Bil*, Kamalini's narrative came to an end when she left her native place and started living in the city, but in case of Charal's case completing her education and

getting a job in Indian railways at a very young age gave her the confidence for her future endeavours. In her later life, Kalyani Thakur Charal became one of the magnificent names in the realm of Bengali Dalit studies. As an act of protest to the vehement casteist discrimination in the state, she adopted the pen name of ‘Charal’ with her surname Thakur, the colloquial phrase of ‘Chandal’ which depicts the trend of changing surname after East Bengali Dalit refugees’ migration to West Bengal. “Usually, the name chosen was caste-neutral or that of a higher-caste” (Chatterjee 95), and this phenomenon helped the East Bengali migrant strata to conceal their actual caste identity, which allowed them in many situations to avoid the caste-based discrimination. Kalyani’s family and their close relatives changed their surname from ‘Mandal’ to ‘Thakur’ (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 45, 68) which creates utter confusion regarding their actual identity. People often confused her to be associated with the family of Rabindranath Tagore because the word ‘Tagore’ in Bengal is pronounced as ‘Thakur’ (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 68). Regarding this Partha Chatterjee suggests that, “this new identity as the individual caste mobility through spatial migration” (Chatterjee 95). Though in reality, it did not act as a permanent solution because Charal advocated the fact that, change of a mere surname does not end the age old casteist discrimination (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 45). It is also evident from the fact that even after having the surname of ‘Thakur’, she has continuously become the victim of deprivation and humiliation in her professional space due to her caste identity. The impact of the surname and caste identity is so vivid in the life of Kalyani that in the case of her novella *Andhar Bil*, she did not disclose the surname of Kamalini. Through the entire narrative, Kamalini is known by her name only, though from her experiences, the fact becomes clear that she also belongs to the Bengali Dalit strata. Her autobiographical narrative and *Andhar Bil* both these narratives became a powerful tool in case of the demystifying the fact that, “the notion of caste is non-existent in West Bengal” (Roy 948). In case of her autobiographical narrative, Kalyani Thakur Charal portrays her position in an agential manner and in case of *Andhar Bil* the author tries to point out an attitude of Dalit resilient power which is bestowed with a particular feminist consciousness called Dalit feminist consciousness. The sense of resilience and the politics regarding the living gets clear from these lines—“small stars also could find their faces in *Andhar Bil*. As a rivers wipes out all the sins; similarly, a lake records all sinful incidents. It is the living history of Kamalini’s village” (*Andhar Bil*, Charal 27).

Posing a Dalit feminist standpoint throughout both the narratives, Charal portray though the pangs of displacement from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) have been encountered by every

Bengali Dalit refugee, it has a serious consequence on Bengali Dalit women strata. Charal describes, it was common among poor Dalit refugees to sell their girl children in exchange of money. They took my aunt's daughter to Delhi in promise of giving work. She did not know that she was sold. Next day she sent a post-card begging uncle to bring her back. When I demanded to see that post-card, uncle angrily retorted that it is lost (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 35).

From the portrayal of her father's grandmother to her own mother and her own elder sister, along with the central protagonist Kamalini in the novella *Andhar Bil* and many other Bengali Dalit women of her surroundings, Charal's narrative situates many Dalit woman characters and portrays their suffering in a detailed manner. Charal's narrative becomes evidence of the fact that, the notions like 'Dalit' and 'woman' are mutually exclusive and have different roles to play in the identity politics. Charal's narrative posed a mighty blow on the sheer hypocrisy of the progressive-minded Bengali intelligentsia— "who speak of the caste discrimination but refuses to "touch" books sold by Dalits—is also pointed out by Charal in another instance where a prominent Bengali feminist pronounces that they believe in "feminism but not in casteism" (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 129). Regarding this, Charal comments, "If educated feminists make such remark, where would we go?" (Ami Keno Charal Likhi, Charal 130). A Dalit feminist reading of these two narratives provides "an intersectional understanding of dalit woman as a category defined through caste and gender intersection looked at through the lens of caste" (Pan 120). Charal's narratives regarding the caste-gender dynamics pointed out towards the notable failure of mainstream Indian feminism to address the issue concerning the caste-gender dynamics. Regarding this issue, Rege commented that, "as a remedy to such ghettoization, there is an urgent need to transform 'their' cause to 'our' cause wherein solidarity is 'achieved ... rather than ascribed'" (Rege 45; Patil 42). Through the first-hand experiences of Charal, the pursuit of the experiences of a second generation Bengali Dalit women becomes clear. *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and *Andhar Bil*, these two narratives of Kalyani Thakur Charal, provide the minute picturization of how caste-gender dynamics have shaped the life of a second-generation Bengali Dalit girl in post-Partition West Bengal, which the mainstream writers of Bengali literature neglected immensely in their literature.

Conclusion

The notions of "'caste-question' in Indian feminism and 'gender dynamics' in the Dalit politics continues to remain a matter of immense debate in the realm of Dalit feminism" (Rege WS40;

Patil 39). Kalyani Thakur Charal's autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (2016) and novella *Andhar Bil* (2019) explore the condition of second-generation Bengali Dalit refugee women and their suffering in the case of the post-Partition West Bengal regarding the issue of rehabilitation based on the contours of caste and gender identity. The intersectional dynamics of caste-gender provide a revised understanding of the nuances of Dalit politics in the post-Partition Bengal historiography from a Dalit feminist standpoint.

Though the notion of caste identity became the primary source of oppression for all the Dalits, the intersectional correlation between caste and gender points out the necessity to understand the difference between women and Dalits. Analyzing both the narratives of Kalyani Thakur Charal, this research article acknowledges difference as a crucial factor in understanding the experiences of Bengali Dalit women strata from the Bengali Dalit community as a whole. Through the close textual analysis of Charal's *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* and *Andhar Bil*, this research attempts to trace the shift from homogeneity to the differentiated experiences of Bengali Dalit women section based on the contours of their caste, gender, and refugee identity. This autobiographical narrative and novella also add newer dimension in terms of post-Partition Dalit scholarship in West Bengal, because previously in case of the discussion regarding Dalit experience, the focalizing point of gender is completely ignored. Charal's bold narrative technique also becomes an everlasting illustration of the protest literature of Bengali Dalits especially of the Bengali Dalit women who aspire for a society that will be equal for them in each and every manner. Charal's narrative shifts from the representation of the stereotypical Dalit lived experiences in the refugee camps of post-Partition West Bengal and imparts an alternative standpoint which immensely helps us to understand the notions of caste-gender stratification, migration, and rehabilitation of Bengali Dalit women in post-Partition West Bengal.

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