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Marginalization and Resistance in Harishankar Jaladas's *Sons of the Sea*

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Abstract

Within the matrix of a class-divided society, the subalterns are always deprived, exploited and humiliated. People have always protested against domination and subjugation in some form or the other. They make an effort to establish equality for the people and remove social injustice. People resist because of social, gender, class, race, caste and postcolonial situations. Harishankar Jaladas, a well-known dalit novelist from Bangladesh, is a representative of marginal fishing community. His novel *Jalputra* which is translated into English as *Sons of the Sea* (2014) is based on the marginal fishermen of North Patenga village of Chattogram district in Bangladesh. As a son of fisherman, he has meticulously described the survival life struggle of his community from his lived experience. In the novel, he has depicted the suffering and exploitation of the fishermen who are being hated, humiliated and suppressed not only by the upper caste Hindus but also by the dominant Muslim community. The miscreant money lenders Shukkur and Sashibhusan exploit the poor fishermen in different ways. The fishermen are compelled to sell fish to them at their fixed rate. But Gangapado organizes the fishermen against the exploitation of the money lenders and invokes a spark of resistance in them. Considering the class struggle, this novel can be read from Marxist ideology and subaltern theoretical perspectives. This paper will explore the exercise of power on the fishermen, their marginalization and their resistance against the exploiters.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Marxist Ideology, Subaltern, Resistance, Fishermen, Social Exclusion.

Literature representing marginalized fishing communities remains underexplored within South Asian subaltern studies. Harishankar Jaladas's novel *Sons of the Sea* provides a powerful literary representation of caste oppression, economic exploitation and collective resistance within a coastal fishing community in Bangladesh. Marginalization and resistance are interrelated terms. Simply

speaking, marginalization is the process of keeping the weaker people in the margin or away from the mainstream society and resistance is the process of protest by the marginalized people. Almost in every society, we come across marginalization and resistance. In Jaladas's writings, the marginalization of the weaker section of the society by the powerful and the inevitable resistance are obvious. He is regarded as a promising writer who exposes the life of the downtrodden in his society to the world. Through his works, he depicts the recurrence of oppression in his society. He also depicts how people are marginalized and how they resist against their marginalization. The novel *Sons of the Sea* deals with a small fishing community living in North Patenga of Chattogram in Bangladesh. The area stands on the shores of the Bay of Bengal. As a son of fisherman, Jaladas has meticulously described the survival life struggle of his community from his lived experience. In the novel, he has depicted the suffering and exploitation of the fishermen who are being hated, humiliated and suppressed not only by the upper caste Hindu but also by the Muslim community. In every sphere of life, the fishermen are marginalized. The very description of the fishermen's quarter also points to their marginal condition. The novelist describes that "the fishermen's quarter of North Patenga is isolated from the habitat of the gentry. It lies lifelessly at the lap of the Bay of Bengal about two miles away from the village of the gentry. The Hindu and Muslim villages stand at a safe distance from the fishermen's quarter" (Jaladas 10). The present study aims to unveil several kinds of marginalization of the fishermen and their responses against such treatment.

Marginalization is a kind of social exclusion. People belonging to the higher strata of a society look upon the marginalized as inferior human beings and treat them inhumanly. People are marginalized on many occasions depending on their caste, class, profession etc. "Marginalization means ... weakening of the ligatures between the individual and the society. Social exclusion is the utmost form of marginalization" (Lämsä). The fishermen of North Patenga would have to obey an annual contract, known as *haja*¹, for fishing in someone's boat. In case of violation of the contract, the violator would be punished through a trial and would be ostracized. He would be banned from fishing. So, no one dared to break the contract as they had to survive on fishing. Though the fishermen have to live beside water bodies for their own profession, Jaladas's delineation of North Patenga, a coastal area in Bangladesh further demonstrates his Dalit identity as territorial marginalization is forced on the Dalits. This territorial marginalization is also a kind of social exclusion. Indian anthropologist N. K. Bose's remark can be relevant 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). Bose opined that many Namashudras were boatmen or fishermen in East Bengal. In India and Bangladesh, the profession of fishing is not taken with social respect though fish and rice are principal food of West Bengal and Bangladesh. But the fishermen are always neglected. People only care for their harvest i.e., the fish they catch, which is a popular food item in these countries. Considering the class struggle, this novel can be read from Marxist ideology and subaltern theoretical perspectives.

Marxist theory explicates all human relations or activities concerning distribution and dynamics of the financial power amongst socio-economic classes in society. In capitalist social structure, the capitalists are the controllers of the productive resources, whereas the proletariats are only the virtual apparatuses working under them. This discriminatory division is apparent in the novel through the influence of the devious money lenders on the illiterate villagers. The money lenders Shukkur and Sashibhusan exploit the poor fishermen in different ways by lending them money on certain conditions. Though the fishermen sometimes understand their deprivation, they are unable to resist as they cannot borrow money from other sources. In a meeting Kamini expressed his exploitation saying that Shukkur has pocketed all his hard-earned money but still he claims that Kamini owes him. At this incident, a thought of resistance appears when Purna *bahaddar*² remarks, "We don't even have the power to resist" (Jaladas 53).

It is also pertinent here to mention Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony where he says that the capitalist or the bourgeoisie use cultural institutions to sustain their power. In this process, the bourgeoisie uses ideology rather than violence. "The shaping of a people's ideologies is, according to Gramsci, a kind of deception whereby the majority of people forget about or abandon their own interests and desires and accept the dominant values and beliefs as their own" (Bressler 198). In the novel the money lenders "advanced money on two conditions. The borrower would have to pay ten percent interest per month on the money he took or they would have to sell all the fish they caught at the price fixed by the *dadonders*" (Jaladas 51). Again, the fishermen could not borrow money from others 'because of the wiles of Shukkur and Sashibhusan' (Jaladas 51).

The dominant or powerful people of a society decide the culture and ideology in the society. They also impose their own system. In such circumstances, the weaker or the marginalized people have to either comply with them or resist against them. As a result, there comes marginalization and resistance. The fishermen's families often starve. The main cause of their starvation is Abdus Shukkur and Sashibhusan who form situations which compel the fishermen to take money from them at a high rate of interest. Here, we can refer to Marxist thinker Louis Althusser who in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* describes: The 'State' is defined in the Marxist tradition as a 'force of repressive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling classes in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat' (Althusser 128). The money-lenders took advantage of the illiteracy of the fishermen. The *dadonders* cheat them by giving false calculation. The illiterate fishermen also keep their calculation in their mind. But at the end of the season, they find a huge difference between their calculation and that of the *dadonders*. When the *dadonders* try to convince the fishermen that their written calculation cannot be wrong, the fishermen think perhaps the *dadonders* are right.

The culture of silence encourages marginalization. Most of the time the marginalized people do not raise their voice even when they are oppressed. They are accustomed to think that they are destined to obey the treatment of the upper-class people. Sometimes they feel that they are inferior and sometimes they are unable to find their oppression. Thus, their voicelessness encourages the oppressors to continue with their oppression. Their lack of education is the main reason of their unconsciousness. With his little education, Gangapado brings the consciousness among his community. The mentality of the subaltern people is obvious in novel. According to Goutam Bhadra, the 'subaltern mentality' consists of the two elements--- submissiveness to the authority and defiance against it. He says, "It is on account of this combination the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favour of the rich and the dominant, at least as often as they have rebelled against the latter" (Bhadra 63). The problem arose with the calculations of Kamini and Shukkur. Though Ganga was unable to complete his education, he could discover the hypocrisy of the money-lenders. Shukkur wanted to cheat Kamini by giving less money but Gangapado, with the help of Dindayal master, proves Kamini's calculation right and compels Shukkur to give the whole amount of money. Thus, Gangapado raises awareness among the fishermen. He asks his fellow fishermen, "Should we be exploited all our life? ...In the name of dadon, butcher Shukkur and Shashibhusan take away all your fish paying you almost nothing" (Jaladas 127). The other fishermen understood the reason of their endless poverty.

Extreme marginalization gives way to resistance. To challenge the hegemonic authority is resistance. As there are different forms of marginalization, the modes of resistance are many. Sometimes people nurture strong hatred against their oppressor but cannot speak, sometimes they retort instantly and when they find no other way to retreat, they naturally fight back. Besides, writers resist through writing and try to aware people and raise their voice. This also helps to bring their issues to the limelight for the wider world. Resistance is a kind of feeling to protect one's self-identity and free from oppression. Now-a-days, resistance literature is gaining importance as a means of decent protest.

“The resistance writer, like the guerrilla of the armed liberation struggle, is actively engaged in an urgent historical confrontation. The questions raised by the resistance leaders are the questions faced by the writers as well” (Barabara 100). Harishankar Jaladas, as a voice of the subaltern community, took up the pen to write the novel *Jalputra*. A spark of resistance is discernible in another incident between Kamini and Shukkur. After much altercation when Kamini refuses to accept the undercut price, Shukkur slaps him. Bijan bahaddar comes first in support of Kamini and says, “You will have to buy fish at market price. Otherwise, he won’t sell fish to you” (Jaladas 66). Then all the bahaddars come to protect Kamini.

Again, in social interaction and marketing, the fishermen can be easily deceived because of their illiteracy. This becomes clear to us when Bijan *bahaddar* orders two nose-rings to goldsmith Rashikranjan. Goldsmith Rashik replies in sweet voice, “Why do you get upset? I was just joking. The more ornaments you order, the more will be my profit. Literate customers ask too many questions about alloy. But you don’t bother us like them. You are very good as a customer” (Jaladas 86).

Jonab Ali’s father, called Jonaippa’s *Baap*⁴ by the fishermen, claims the only road to the sea to be his own though the government compensated him properly for constructing the road on his land. Standing on the road, he continues exploitation day after day. If anyone refuses to give him free fish, he curses that person. After an altercation, he knocked Bangshi’s mother with his stick and moves towards Bangshi. Suddenly, Bangshi’s father stands up with the *piri*⁵ in his hand and threatens him. Though Jonab Ali’s father leaves, he leaves them palpitating because he can attack them anytime.

The fisherwomen are no less humiliated in the society but they cannot always protest against their humiliation. One day Bangshi’s mother and three other women were left behind in the sea-ghat. Blocking Bangshi’s mother, Jonab Ali’s father used abusive language and reminded her of her refusal to give him fish the other day. When Bangshi’s mother told him to mind his language, he pushed the *kharang*⁶ from her head and the fish scattered. She was hopeless. Bhuban at once came to resist this humiliation and said, “down with your ancestors, how dare you hit a woman” (Jaladas 87). The other women also joined in the protest and beating Jonab Ali’s father, ‘they knocked him on the ground’ (Jaladas 88). Soon, a few Muslim farmers and a few fishermen came and supported the protest of the women. The Muslim farmers told Jonab Ali’s father that it was wrong to hit a woman irrespective of their caste and reminded him that the road belonged to the government. The report of this incident spread far and wide in the fishing community: “Four destitute fisherwomen did what stout and wealthy fishermen had not been able to do. Bhubaneswari was cited over and over again. She led the assault. The woman who had been battered by fate all her life woke up today. She gave the first blow” (Jaladas 88).

This incident proved that marginal women in union could resist powerfully to protect themselves.

Besides the fishermen, the novel also tells the struggling story of Bhubaneswari, the female protagonist of the novel. Through her character the novelist highlights the sufferings of the fisherwomen, their exploitation and resistance. She loses her husband at the outset of the story. She starts her desperate struggle against poverty and also against the age-old tradition of her community. She puts her son Gangapado into school in order to improve their condition. In her community, no one thinks of sending his or her children to school. Jaladas expresses the true role of women and sons of the fishermen, “Education is a luxury to the fishermen; women among them are born to cook for the family and give birth to children every year. By the time the fishermen’s sons cross ten or twelve they have to go to fish in the sea or canals or marshes” (Jaladas10). Bhuban’s character perfectly brings out the true condition of the fisherwomen. She becomes widow at the age of 19. It also indicates that the fishermen lead a precarious life depending upon the whims of nature. The novelist aptly describes their condition: “Many of the women of this fishermen’s quarter are widows. Their husbands died in the sea. Some

were claimed by tempest, while some drowned in the fathomless water as they got tangled with the fishing nets. A few died of snake bites" (Jaladas 15).

The practice of caste system is another inhuman ideology that compels the fishermen to lead an outcaste life. The caste issues and treatment of the upper-caste always discourage the fishermen's sons to continue their education. At the school, the upper-caste Hindu students consider themselves as superior and always try to maintain a safe distance from Gangapado. They mockingly call him fisherman or *Dom*⁷. With their growing, their harassment continues to grow up. Ganga gradually loses interest in school. Again, abject poverty does not leave Ganga's mother. She was unable to pay Ganga's examination fees. Ganga's humiliation at school, his mother's suffering for selling fish and their economic problem compel him to leave his study. In the long run, the government fails to provide them with better education, basic human rights and works.

Jaladas's novel *Sons of the Sea* shows the resistance of the marginalized fishermen against the repressive social order. As Foucault rightly asks: "if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?" (Foucault 36). He also claims in his book *The History of Sexuality* that "where there is power there is resistance" (Foucault 36). In his opinion, rise of power in a society results in resistance. Complying with Foucault we can say that where there is extreme marginalization, there is resistance. Gangapado unites the poor fishermen against the exploitation of the money lenders and raises a spark of resistance in them. The event of Ganga's mother's humiliation by a middle-aged man in the hut brings the consciousness of the fishermen. People crowded before Bhuvan to buy fish and many were buying fish from her. Suddenly, the man called Bhuvan '*Domni*⁸' and shoved her head with the butt of his umbrella for being late to answer his query about the price. Bhuvan fell and she was splashed with mud. In protest, Ganga beat the man severely. Some of the shoppers were in support of Ganga but some of them said: "How dare a *Dom* lays hands on a Muslim? Crush the son of a bitch" (Jaladas 133). In the meantime, the fellow-fishermen came to protect Ganga and they appreciated Ganga's courage which was beyond their imagination. Praising Ganga, Jagadish said, "The fishermen have been insulted in this manner for ages, but no one ever thought of protesting. You are the pioneer. You have opened our eyes," (Jaladas 134). This incident brings revolution in their community. Actually, Ganga taught a lesson to his community that they should protest against social injustice to live as humans. But the moneylenders continued their dirty game to stop the resistance of the fishermen. In such a situation Gopal worked as a traitor for his community. He helped Shukkur and Shasibhushan by supplying the secret plans of the fishermen. Finally, miscreant Shukkur trapped Ganga and killed him. But the spark of resistance that Ganga has put into the mind of fishermen does not stop. It raises a new spirit of revolt. The heated fishermen set Shukkur's farm house on fire. The fire could stand as a metaphor for fire of resistance in the heart of the united fishermen.

This article has endeavoured to expose and comprehend marginalization and resistance through the select text of Harishankar Jaladas. The study has attempted to showcase the several aspects of marginalization and their consequences. The author has beautifully depicted the societal injustice meted out to the underprivileged fishermen from his lived experience. Through his novel *Sons of the Sea*, Jaladas urges the subaltern fishermen to raise their voice against suppression and educate their children. The novel begins with the death of Bhuvan's husband and ends with the death of her son. Her life is full of struggle and sufferings. Still, she is hopeful about Gangapado's yet to be born child who is supposed to bring about a radical change in their fate and uproot social exploitation in the fishermen's lives. "In her sight shone the bright light of expectation for the yet to be born the son of the sea, Banomali" (Jaladas 169).

Notes

1. Haja: an annual contract for fishing in another's boat

2. Bahaddar: a solvent and powerful fisherman
3. Dadonder: money-lender
4. Baap: father
5. Piri: slightly raised wooden seat
6. Kharang: basket to carry fish
7. Dom: a term of abuse implying that one is low-born; the word is also used for helpers in crematoriums or people who are engaged in cleaning open latrines
8. Domni: female for dom implying one's low birth; untouchable

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