

“I am Chandalini, and I am Proud of that. You must Accept and Respect it”: In Conversation with Kalyani Thakur Charal

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A Bengali Dalit woman writer, and activist, Kalyani Thakur Charal is a notable name in the realm of Bengali Dalit literature. Her works centre on the dynamic nuances of caste and gender-based issues prevalent in West Bengal. Born in the year 1965 in Nadia district’s Bagula in West Bengal, her writing focuses on the pangs and sufferings of the Bengali Dalit strata. Bold in her personality and writing style, Charal became a topic of discussion in the literary field when she started using her original surname, ‘Charal’, to assert her identity. In her literary career she has self-published several poetry collections, short story collections and collections of her essays. Some of her celebrated works are her autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (Why I Sign as Charal, 2016) published by Chaturtha Duniya in 2016, her essay collection *Chandalinir Bibriti* (Account by a Chandalini, 2012) and her novella *Andhar Bil* (Andhar Bil in English translation) published in 2022. She also edits a Bengali vernacular journal titled *Nir Ritupatra* where people from the Dalit strata contribute articles on diverse issues like Dalit women’s issues, folk culture, refugee problems and water crises. Kalyani Thakur Charal believes, “it is imperative to record the parallel histories of the various caste-based communities in Bengal/India” (Gupta, 2020, p. 31). Her works portrays the diverse angles of caste-based stratification, caste-gender intersectionality and the sufferings of the Dalit strata in West Bengal.

DEBDATTA CHAKRABORTY & SARBANI BANERJEE (DC & SB): Can you tell us about your experiences of caste discrimination in West Bengal?

KALYANI THAKUR CHARAL (KTC): I spent my childhood in Bagula in the Nadia district. That region was mainly a *Namasudra* (one of the schedule caste communities originating from the Eastern and Central part of Bengal) populated area. It was only in my later life I realized that I and other students from my caste were treated differently in the school where we went, and it was mainly because of our caste identity. So, I have vividly written about it in my poems, short stories, and, above all, in my autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (Why I Write Charal, 2016). However, after coming to Kolkata, I have come to understand the caste dynamics and how they affect the lives of people in a deep manner. I personally believe

that the city space is a cosmo-caste space where people of different castes live together. In a cosmopolitan space like Kolkata (capital of West Bengal), I had to be insulted many times due to my Thakur (in English, 'Tagore') surname. People often ask me questions regarding my caste identity. If I am a Brahmin? Is my family identity associated with Rabindranath Tagore? Because the Tagore surname is pronounced as Thakur in Bengali. I answered firmly, no, we are *Namasudra* Tagore, and we don't have any connection with Rabindranath Tagore's family. I have to explain this matter every time. But later, I felt the need to explain to everyone what my real identity is. In colonial times, Bengali *Namasudras* were known as *Chandals* or *Charals*. That is why I added the word Charal as a surname to my name in my autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*. Because it is the symbol of my identity and portrays who I am. From childhood to professional life and also in the different phases of life I have encountered caste discrimination in diverse manners. So, no doubt, caste discrimination is a crucial part of the Dalit experience, which every Dalit encounters differently.

DC & SB: Does patriarchy work as a crucial factor in the Dalit woman's experience?

KTC: If you observe our society minutely, you will understand that the role of patriarchy is decisive here. Patriarchy exists in this society, and many people, mainly the women strata, have suffered due to that. Patriarchy has a crucial role in the lives of the women strata and when the caste factor is added with the identity of Dalit women strata then their marginalization also becomes critical. They have been marginalized by the patriarchal forces on the pretext of their caste and gender identity. The patriarchal domination can come from outside of their society as well as from within their society, which creates complications in regard to the upliftment of the Dalit women strata.

But there are exceptions also in many cases. I get a lot of support from my family, specifically from my father, Krishna Chandra Thakur. My father was a staunch feminist. He said all his life that his sons and daughters were equal to him. My father used to inspire all of us to do all kinds of work. He used to say there is no difference between boys and girls, and both are equally capable of doing all the things in their lives. My father often told me that you are as capable as your brothers and that both men and women are capable of doing all kinds of work. However, this is not the case for many other Dalit women of the society, who are suffering in their day-to-day life due to the impact of patriarchy. So, I believe though there is an influence of patriarchy in our societal system, the scenario was quite different in my case.

DC & SB: What challenges have you encountered as a Bengali Dalit writer in West Bengal?

KTC: What I feel about this is that there are a lot of publishing opportunities for mainstream Bengali writers because there are a lot of publishers and little magazines constantly working in their case. In the case of such publishers or little magazines, the scope of publishing pieces written by Bengali Dalit writers is

minimal. Dalit literature emerged as a crucial segment of the Dalit movement in India. Sponsorship has a significant role in the publishing world, and we do not receive considerable sponsorship for our work. We have to write our articles, print them with our money, and sell them ourselves. The way Dalits are portrayed in the mainstream Bengali literature, I feel that not much has been discussed about us. Many of our thinkers are not mentioned there, and I think everyone needs to know about our movement and our fight against caste discrimination. Our forefathers were not allowed to have an education for a long time, so I think everyone needs to know the complete history regarding Bengali Dalit literature and its history. So, for that reason, I have been doing as much as possible. I have been writing about my people, their history, and their struggles.

DC & SB: You have written about the Bengali Dalit strata in detail through your creative writing. Can creative writing be used as a social activism tool to portray the discrimination against the Dalits?

KTC: We are trying to portray our experiences and sufferings through our writings. But there are some reasons why we started writing. One of the motives behind starting our writing was that the people from the lower castes would read our writings, be influenced by them, and then realize their worth in society. But that didn't happen. Most people have not read these texts, and many are reluctant to read them. But it is also true that the situation has changed a lot in the last thirty years. Now, many people are protesting. With the advent of social media, many have learned to express their thoughts on those platforms. And it is through this social media that they are talking about the discriminatory stance of the Brahminical system. In this context, the folk poets have also raised their voices against the Brahminical system with us. We can see the reflection of this protest writing in Matua literature and also in the words of Harichand-Guruchand. Taking references from our past and impacted by the experiences one has encountered as a Dalit, we portray our side of the story through creative writing. Though it's creative writing but it is highly influenced by our lives.

From Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) to Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) and Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937), these prominent figures have worked for the welfare of the ordinary person throughout their life. In today's time, it is imperative to discuss such great personalities because without knowing about them, it is not possible to know the complete history of the marginalized people. The denial of the mainstream literature towards these great personalities and their history, ignoring the works of these people, their work should come before everyone. The struggle of Dalit people and their history shows that they have been denied and negated their basic rights in different ways at different levels of their lives. Hence, their experiences and sufferings must come before all sections of society. For these reasons, creative writing is very important for Dalit literature and Dalit consciousness and can be used as a tool for their activism.

DC & SB: Tell us something about your magazine, *Nir Ritupatra*. How, according to you, has it contributed to the emergence of Bengali Dalit women writers?

KTC: *Nir* has played a crucial role in my entire writing career. In fact, I never thought of doing something very planned like *Nir*. And it's not like someone has guided me regarding this venture. Many times, I also have to face criticism due to it. I often have to face the question of whether it is necessary to work separately on Dalit women when you are working on Dalit literature. From the beginning, I have dealt with several issues that I feel are troubling and need addressing. With the emergence of social media, it is very easy to reach many people simultaneously. However, social media was not developed when I started working for *Nir*. So, I felt that if, through my work, even if three hundred people could be informed about a problem, my purpose would be worthwhile. So that's why, firstly, I published only three hundred copies of *Nir* and discussed the issues that needed to be discussed. In this context, I would like to say that through *Nir*, I have tried to inform people about Dalit women's issues, their challenges, folk culture, folk drama, refugee problems, conservation systems, water problems, and many more poignant issues in our society.

For a prolonged time, I have worked on overall debatable issues. After some time, I realized that one thing might be repeatedly getting left out of this discussion. In Dalit literature, too, Dalit women have little place of presence. I thought then, how can it be said that a society is advanced if the women's segment is not advanced or does not come forward in every stratum. And in many cases, the reason why Dalit women do not come forward is a lack of education, and financial crisis in the family. The caste-gender intersectional identity of the Bengali Dalit women strata is a crucial factor behind their marginalization.

To write Dalit literature, one must have economic solvency. Because after writing about Dalit literature, publishing that piece is also essential. By publishing those writings, the readers of that literature will learn about the various facets of Dalit literature. So, I can say from my experience that many factors act as determinants in the literature on Bengali Dalit women. Since the representation of women in Bengali Dalit literature is meagre, I feel that girls should come forward in different fields of writing. Not only Dalit girls but also girls from various communities who need representation; *Nir* is the medium through which they can start their journey. Through this effort, I thought maybe many Mahashweta Devis (1926-2016) would be born who could not write until now due to lack of opportunity. I have always felt that the contribution of Bengali Dalit women to the trajectory of Bengali Dalit literature is important. When a section of our society is backward, how can we say that our society or literature is moving forward? Mahasweta Devi devoted her entire life to the cause of tribal people. My point is why an Adivasi girl will not be a representative of Adivasis. I feel that if any women from the tribal community represented the tribals as their author representative, then the picture might have been different. So, for a prolonged period *Nir* is working on these issues and works as a medium of representation for the marginalized women section.

DC & SB: It's been widely understood that Dalit women are doubly marginalized due to their gender and Dalit identity. Do you think in that regard, the Bengali Dalit women are triply marginalized because, in their case, the notion of refugee identity is also there because West Bengal faced partition in the year 1947 and a high number of Bengali Dalit women came to West Bengal from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as refugees?

KTC: In this context, I want to mention that Bengalis have denied the very presence of caste itself in the case of West Bengal. For the sake of the so-called progressive stance of West Bengal as a state, they say that caste and caste-based issues have no relevance here. Despite their demands, we continued our struggle and wrote about the experiences of the Dalit people of West Bengal. Even if we look closely at the history of partition, we can understand how much suffering the lower caste (Dalit) people had to endure at that time. All districts dominated by Bengali Dalits were included in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the partition of India in 1947. Most of the upper-class, educated people moved to Kolkata (the capital of West Bengal) with jobs and started living there. But the history of Bengali Dalits shows that they came from East Pakistan to West Bengal much later. If you look at the lower caste agricultural people, who used to earn their livelihood by cultivating a small amount of land in the erstwhile East Pakistan, their experience during the partition was miserable. They came to West Bengal almost penniless, leaving their little agricultural land behind. This was also the case of my father, Krishna Chandra Thakur. So, from that point of view, if a person belongs to the Dalit strata, also has a refugee background and female identity, then the issue of triple marginalization undoubtedly comes up because, after partition, the Bengali Dalit strata had to face several problems due to their caste, gender, and refugee identity.

Already the issues based on the notions of caste and gender have substantially contributed to the suffering of the Bengali Dalit women strata. In addition, with it, the refugee identity of the Bengali Dalit women who have come to West Bengal after partition put them in a jeopardized condition where they become the nameless, faceless, and voiceless lot of people devoid of basic facilities in the host nation which became the reason for their triple marginalization.

DC & SB: Bengal has a rich history of anti-caste resistance against Brahminism since Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) and his son Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937). The Matua dharma, as a belief system, created by the *Namasudra* populace of Bengal to fight caste oppression, is a part of this anti-caste struggle of Bengal that you repeatedly mention in your autobiographical narrative *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (2016). So, do you think Matua Dharma has influenced the writings of the Bengali Dalit writers a lot?

KTC: Discussing about the Matua sect academicians suggest “it is a sect that broke away from Brahmanical Hinduism in nineteenth-century Bengal” (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 435). Regarding the discussion about the Matua religion, it should be remembered that not all *Namasudras* are Matuas. While discussing the *Paundra Kshatriyas* (one of schedule caste communities of West Bengal), I noticed they are far away from this movement, as Vaishnavism influenced a more significant part of them. So, among the *Paundra Kshatriyas*, the number of Matuas is less; among the *Namasudras*, the number of Matuas is more, but not all *Namasudras* are Matuas. The Matua ideology influences me and my family, but that does not mean that all Bengali Dalits are Matuas. That’s why the Matuas should not be lumped together with the *Namasudras*. Even in the case of *Nir* magazine, not all the Bengali Dalit families who write for it come from the Matua sect. Nevertheless, I came together with them to bring out an issue of *Nir* about the great personalities of Bengali Dalit literature. I feel that it is imperative to know about Bengali Dalit history and their great men, and thus, the words of Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, and B. R. Ambedkar should come up through our pen.

Similarly, in the context of the discussion about Matua Dharma and its influence, it has to be said that those who are aware of Matua Dharma, its ideals, and the ideologies of Harichand-Guruchand Thakur, their works and writings, are especially inspired by them. In my case, my family was particularly influenced by the Matua religion and its ideals. My father followed the words of Harichand-Guruchand in many aspects of his life. My father used to remember the words of Harichand-Guruchand and used to tell us “eat or don’t eat, it doesn’t matter. Educating your children is a matter of immense importance for me” (translation mine, Charal, 2016, p. 19). Later, when I started writing, I felt that ordinary people need to know about the Matua religion, their founders, and their thinking. So, in my writings and even in my autobiography, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, I mention about Matua religion and its ideologies.

DC & SB: You have written so many short stories. What’s the core reason for writing short stories? In your opinion, which genre can express the Dalit consciousness in the best manner: autobiography, essays, novels, poetry, or short stories?

KTC: One of the reasons behind writing short stories was to write something new by adding my thoughts on what I have seen and realized in different facets of my life. But all genres have their role to play in the realm of Dalit literature. Based on the Dalit consciousness, when Dalit writers present their experiences through a genre, ordinary people can learn about their life history, experiences, and suffering. But if we talk about Dalit readers, I have seen firsthand that their inclination is more towards essays than fiction nowadays. Because fictional writing like poetry, drama, and short stories have their style and aesthetics as a genre, as a reader, you have to get into it, and after reading deeply, you have to think about it

and try to understand the essence of that writing.

In the context of Dalit literature, I am not claiming that there are no readers for fiction writing like poetry, plays, and short stories; these genres also have readers. Regarding the discussion about Dalit readers, I can say that they are more interested in reading essay books dealing with the history of caste, Dalit movements, and the experiences of Dalit people on the pretext of caste. This means their tendency towards critical writing is greater, but creativity has always existed among Dalit people. A lack of continuity may be seen in the discussion of the creative writing of the Dalit people, as they were deprived of education for a prolonged period, but they also kept their creativity alive through oral tradition. We can see their poems, the Bhawaiya and Bhatiyali songs (forms of popular folk music), and the long-lasting folk culture these Dalit people have retained. Reading *Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita* and *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* as well as Hari sangeet, and Matua sangeet it is understood that before these books were published, Bengali Dalit people used to sing these songs in different places. Therefore, it can be said in the context of the creativity of Dalit people that they expressed their thoughts through various genres for a long time, but it took a long period for them to be published in the form of books. Therefore, in the case of Dalit literature, the feelings inspired by the Dalit consciousness and experiences encountered as a Dalit should come before everyone, whether it is through any literary genre.

DC & SB: In your notable essay, *Borno Bibhokto Somaje Poshchimi Naaribaad Kotota Projojyo* (2021) (How Western Feminism is applicable in a Society which is Divided on the pretext of Caste), you mentioned that “Jyotirao Phule’s wife Savitribai Phule and his maternal sister Sagunabai are the pioneers of Dalit feminism in India” (Charal, 2021, p.317, Translation mine). Please tell us about some of the crucial Dalit women characters from Bengal.

KTC: If we wanted to know about the Dalit women figures from Bengal worth mentioning, then we need to read about Sushma Maitra Sarkar. She is a Dalit female figure working with Jogendra Nath Mandal (1904-1968). When B. R. Ambedkar stood for election from Bengal in 1946, we see that Sushma Maitra Sarkar and some other women went out to collect donations for the election. They collected the donations and handed them over to Jogendra Nath Mandal. Before this, we can also see that Harichand Thakur’s mother, Annapurna Devi, stood against caste discrimination and supported her son in his mission, although we do not find any written mention of it. We learn the same story of resistance about Harichand Thakur’s wife, Shanti Mata Devi. If we talk about them, it can be seen that even though their work does not receive limelight or publicity, they are working silently for their cause. Guruchand Thakur’s wife, Satyabhama Devi, also stands against the ills of caste discrimination. She also has a keen interest in Dalit women’s education. However, we do not find anything specifically written about Satyabhama Devi in the written records or

documents. From these issues, it is understood that they continue to give silent moral support for the anti-caste struggle and try to establish an egalitarian society. This is also applicable to Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's wife, Boro Maa Binapani Devi. Talking about her character, it has to be said that she has worked as a leading matriarch figure of the Matua Mahasangha. Many important Dalit female figures have contributed significantly to the Dalit literary movement of Bengal. Annapurna Devi, Satyabhama Devi, Sushma Maitra Sarkar, and Boro Maa Binapani Devi are among those many significant women characters whose names are worth mentioning.

DC & SB: As a celebrated writer-activist from the Bengali Dalit strata, do you think enough has been done regarding Dalit women's empowerment?

KTC: No, it is not yet the right time to say everything has been done for Dalit women's empowerment. Providing opportunities to Dalit women through various projects does not mean they are empowered. Dalit women will realize they have reached a place of empowerment the day they overcome all obstacles, gain education, and become empowered to help other women come forward. I think that when Dalit women become socially, economically, educationally, and politically empowered and can show the way to ten more women from the marginalized section to come forward in society, then it can be said that they are empowered.

DC & SB: Starting from Nadia district's Bagula to your literary visit to Australia, you have crossed a prolonged path. "You started writing when you were only eighteen" (Gupta, 2020, p.31), precisely in the scenario when very few voices of Bengali Dalit women could be heard. So, how did you start writing, or what inspired you to write?

KTC: Very often, people ask me this question. You will notice that many Bengali boys and girls start writing poetry during their growing years. My writing also started similarly. After I started writing poetry, I wrote a lot of romantic poems. Later, when I joined the Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, I began writing poems of social awareness, keeping Dalits in mind. I also started writing poems about Chuni Kotal and her life. Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha organized the Chuni Kotal annual discussion meeting, many Dalit writers and poets were asked to recite their poems for that event. So, at that time, each of us tried to write poems while keeping in mind the pangs and struggles of the Dalit strata. We also have written several poems on Chuni Kotal. In this manner, I started writing poems and several other literary pieces.

After that, discussions and meetings organized by various organizations, conversations with the other Dalit writers, my studies on the Dalit cause, and the overall influence of my father Krishna Chandra Thakur

also influenced me a lot in continuing my writing. I thought a lot about the scenario of the day-to-day life of the Dalit strata, Dalit women's causes and their miseries. Thinking about all these factors, I used to get angry at societal situations and started writing about them. Later, I also wrote poems about the nostalgia associated with my past life, my village life, and the experiences I faced as a Bengali Dalit woman while growing up. I have not written these articles very consciously, but when the social malpractice towards Dalits makes me think a lot, then I feel that it is necessary to write about these issues. My pen is the medium of my protest. So, I continue to write about my people and their sufferings. I started writing when I was young, and I will continue writing as long as possible.

DC & SB: In many of your writings, you have addressed yourself as Chandalini. So, why did you use this term in case of your writing?

KTC: Dalit literature is essentially a struggle for identity. People constantly fight for their identity and rights related to that identity through Dalit literature. If one can feel proud of one's Brahminical identity, I can feel proud of my Chandal identity. That's why I think everyone should stick to it and feel proud of their identity. I used the terms 'Chandalini' or 'Chandal' in my various writings because this is my identity. I am Chandalini and I am proud of that; you must accept and respect it. The most crucial point is I am equal to you. From the standpoint of equality, I will call *Chandal* as *Chandal*, *Dom* as *Dom*, and *Kaibarta* as *Kaibarta* (*Dom* and *Kaibarta* represents scheduled caste communities of West Bengal).

In daily life, it can be seen that many Dalit people have changed their surnames only because they want to protect themselves from day-to-day caste discrimination. However, changing their surname does not solve all the problems associated with caste discrimination. To prevent caste-based discrimination, there is a need to change the mentality of the people living in the society. Likewise, I have no problem using my real surname. Many people find using the name 'Chandalini' or the surname 'Charal' is strange. But 'Charal' and 'Chandalini' are integral to my identity. So, I will write 'Charal' and 'Chandalini', whether you like them or not, because they are essential to my identity. And that is why I have adopted my real identity.

DC & SB: Let's talk about poetess Kalyani. One can sense the essence of anger in your poems like "The Opportunists Steal Your Thunder" and "A Conversation Between the Oppressor and the Oppressed". How has this anger shaped your writings?

KTC: Yes, I have written many pieces in my writing career influenced by the injustice imposed on the Dalit strata. In my life whenever I saw discrimination and unjustness against the Dalit strata, the feelings of anger associated with it influenced me to write something new. In the realm of Dalit literature, the emotion of anger has a crucial role to play. In my case, most of the texts written in this moment of anger are poems.

And to talk about these two poems, when there are serious problems going on in places like Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal, I felt how Dalit people are affected by those problems in a serious manner. So, I thought, I need to write something about it. This is how these two poems are created. In West Bengal, the *bhadralok* populace always exploited the Dalit strata. Regarding the term *bhadralok*, Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis suggests, “this term came into use around the beginning of the nineteenth century, was associated in colonial times with upper-caste Hindus with access to some wealth or landed property and claims to a liberal education. The notion has been continually changed since the early twentieth century. *Chhotolok*, on the other hand, refers to unlettered, uncultured people belonging to a low-caste order” (2021, p. 827). Pointing out the differences between these two sections, that’s why I wrote in “The Opportunists Steal Your Thunder”,

Pardon me

Unlike you, I cannot

Add my voice

Standing behind rallies.

You, who want to save the paddy fields,

Or who desire industrialization, did you have

Any ancestor work in the fields?

The farmers are the vote bank for you (Charal and Dasgupta 2020, p. 133)

Similarly, in “A Conversation between the Oppressor and the Oppressed”, I proclaim,

In the name of development

When you kings fight,

The peasants die.

At my age, this troubles me deeply (Charal and Dasgupta 2020, p.137)

So yes, anger infused with the internal Dalit consciousness became one of the significant reasons behind writing such pieces.

DC & SB: Thank you for your time, Madam!

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