

# The Unheard Voices of the Subaltern in Harshankar Jaladas's *Ramgolam*

A S M Iftekarul Azam<sup>1</sup>, Saima Taium<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Port City International University, Chittagong, Bangladesh)

<sup>2</sup>(Graduate Student, Department of English, Port City International University, Chittagong, Bangladesh)

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates the class struggle of the Harijans (Hindu sweepers) in Bangladesh as portrayed in Harishankar Jaladas's Ramgolam. Due to society-imposed identifier of 'untouchability', the scavengers in Bangladesh have historically been subjected to discrimination and marginalization. They have been deprived of choices such as free selection of occupation, access to housing, education and other rights. Contending with the conventional notion that Hinduism maintains social order by caste hierarchies and divisions of labour, Jaladas shows how the desperate poor people respond to the notion of untouchability and show resistance to caste discrimination. The protagonist Ramgolam occupies a significant place in Bangla literature through his unique leadership and for his escapade towards freedom from social supremacy. It is arguable that it is not only by Hindu religious ideology but also through historical, colonial, economic, political and social aspects of caste-based discrimination that eventually leads them to raise their voices in a world where no one is there to hear them. Through qualitative research methodology, this paper concludes in implying the never-ending struggle of the Harijan sweepers which remains unnoticed to the civilized world and the subaltern are not capable enough to deal with the hegemony imposed by bureaucracy and political conspiracy.*

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## I. Introduction

Harishankar Jaladas has been an iconic figure in Bengali literature in recent times with his sensitivity towards the marginalized people and the representation of human struggle in world full of discrimination. With his authentic style of writing and love for the lower-class, he works as a rescuer for the millions in diasporic literature. Thus, *Ramgolam* is voice for the unheard fightback of the scavengers whom the society treats like 'sub-humans' or sometimes 'non-humans'. The Harijans are a special group of people who were imported from India to use them in cleaning the human waste (toilets) and to make them work in sectors where 'civilized' people do not work. The novel put forth the sufferings and social issues they face at every stage of their life. Like the texts of Manik Bandyopadhyay in Bangladesh and Derek Walcott in the Caribbean, Jaladas investigates how the subaltern has to go a long way to achieve their basic rights and to be treated like the other humans.

Equality is the quality or state of being equal: the quality or state of having the same rights and social status. It is a state where men and women, people of different races, religions, etc are all treated fairly. Almighty has created us equal, but in the name of caste, class and other man-imposed issues, discrimination has spread like cancer in every nook and corner of the world. *Ramgolam* was written in 2012, but it tells a sorry tale of an attitude which brings nothing but discrimination towards a community. Like other parts of world literature, authors of Bangla literature have also dealt with different strata of the society. These people are always neglected and deprived of their rights and social status. There is no denying the fact that low-classes are, as a whole, the poorest and the most disadvantaged group in Bangladesh. They have no other income generating activities except their works and it cannot be carried out throughout the year. In *Ramgolam*, the author presents three major characters representing three generations: Ramgolam, the protagonist, his father Sheucharan, and grandfather Gurucharan. Set in a place named Firingibazaar, a crowded and grimy area in Chittagong city, the novel captures a time during Bangladesh's post-independence years when new sewage systems and sweeper recruitment policies created anger and led to protest among the Harijans. Harishankar Jaladas also has written about low-classes. The novel begins with Ramgolam's enquiry about his name which, to him, sounds unusual and doesn't rhyme with his father's. Gurucharan informs him that the name combines two sacred terms in

Hinduism and Islam. The blending was done expecting respect from both the communities because typical Hindu names had only brought contempt and neglect. The plot of the novel progresses with a few significant events which are important to understand the author's imaginative wisdom and the novel's coherence.

The novel climaxes with the corporation's notice that the jobs once reserved exclusively for the Harijans would now be kept open for all—irrespective of caste and religion. Since the Harijans are not permitted to do any other jobs, they fear this would put them into severe economic hardships and existential crisis. One day Gurucharan shares his life experience with Kartik that they live like crows. From the wee hours, both the 'methars' (local term for scavengers) and crows jump into the dustbins. Therefore, dustbins are the symbols of abandoned life that the Harijans live. But dustbins keep the society healthy by maintaining health and hygiene not for itself but for the rest in the society. Likewise, the scavengers are inevitable and undeniable part of the society. How can they be ignored and abandoned? Here, reminding a few instances that make us visualize their sufferings and feel the streak of pain that runs through their collective experience. In this context, the author alludes to Manusanghita, a scripture held holy by them. To Anjali's dismay, Gurucharan throws verbal abuse at Monu, the saint who composed the holy text, and holds him responsible for their present destiny. There are inequalities that have become unavoidable in the life of Ramgolam and his community. The character of Gurucharan reflects the legacy of the issue of marginalization and lack of power in his community which finds its end in Ramgolam. Not only social equalities but also religion-oriented caste inequalities have been shown there. The caste system stratifies the Hindu population of South Asia into upper and lower caste groups. Bangladesh is no exception. Based on the Varna system, the caste in Hinduism is categorized into a ladder consisting of Brahman, Kshatriya or Chhetri, Vaisya, and Sudra. In this hierarchy, Brahman is at the top, followed by Chhetri, Vaisya, and Sudra; second, third and fourth, respectively. Not just our touch, even if a Hindu or a Brahmin steps on our shadows, he gets polluted. It is a heinous sin for them. They would be sent to Rourab if after treading on our shadows they do not recite Gayatri mantra for one hundred thousand times and fast for a whole day. This kind of racial discrimination ruins their life. They are regarded as wretched and outcasts. The man-made disparity has covered their right of their country. The term 'Untouchable' comes from social hegemony and the subaltern cannot raise their voices. As caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, heredity transmission of a style of life which often includes an occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution. There is also the intensity of the movement. In this novel, Jaladas shows how the powerful class abuses power and manages history differently.

The researcher expects that this research is going to provide such great contributions and significance both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study provides new thoughts to expand the augmentation of literal knowledge, which focuses the gap between low and high classes. In *Ramgolam*, we observe how Gurucharan and Ramgolam fight for their right, how Abdus Shalam as a high class has treated them, how people think about them, and how a hateful feeling of society has been created on low classes. But if they get proper rights, they can also develop our economy. Inequality spreads all over the world; it is universal throughout the globe where the haves and the have-nots are face-to-face. Unemployment is on the rise in different parts of the world. Therefore, this article raises the voice with the protagonist Ramgolam who shoulders a burden for his community to create enough employment opportunities for the subaltern.

## II. Literature Review

*Ramgolam* provides a graphic description of the scavengers' never-ending struggle in post-independence Bangladesh. The protagonist comes out with his best efforts and wisdom to fight against all odds that have encircled them since their ancestors entered the country. This includes the situation of the people who are obstructed in the historical chain. In this novel, Jaladas has shown how the powerful class abuses power and manages history differently. Bengali literature is enriched through the mastery of many authors who uphold the voices of the subaltern to bring changes in a society where disparity prevails at every sphere of life. As portrayed in *Untouchable*, a protest novel, in which Mulk Raj Anand's method of attacking the social evil of the caste system invites the attention of the people. It deals with Bakha, an eighteen years old sweeper in pre-independence period of India. It also inspects the depression of the outcast or subaltern and their anger against upper castes. Bakha is a day dreamer, but he is obsessed to live like the Britishers copying their lifestyle. In this regard, Anand describes the circumstances when his father rudely orders him to get up: "Get up, ohe you Bakhiya, ohe son of a pig!" came his father's voice, sure as the daylight, from the midst of a broken, jarring, interrupted snore. "Get up and attend to the latrines or the sepoy's will be angry" (Anand 5). Firstly, Bakha is addressed as pig that is linked with the human waste and latrines. The imagery is used to reveal the degradation of man's dignity to show the escalation of the dehumanization process of the scavengers. In the turn of the 19th century India, Tagore (25) echoes the significance of human equality and diminishing of high or low classes in his famous fiction *Gora*. The world-renowned poet is known mostly for his religious and humane literature that emphasizes humanity over the caste system. In *Padma Nadir Majhi* by Manik Bandyopadhyay, the great

mouthpiece of the subaltern, the ever-widening gap has been depicted with his limitless love for them. We see that Dhananjoy gives less labour as he is the owner of the boat and net. "The boat is Dhananjoy's property as well as the net. The fishes whichever they get in every night half of those are taken by Dhananjoy and the other half are for Kuber and Ganesh. (Bandopadhyay 3) This exposes the ever-struggling fishermen in Bangladesh where the subaltern are forced to work with bare minimum for the opportunists and greedy 'mahajans' (businessmen and lenders). Harishankar Jaladas can be termed as the new-generation of Manik Bandhopadhyay as his stories cover the life of the low-caste Hindus which universalizes him as an author. He himself had the upbringing in a fisherman-family in Patenga, Chittagong which is a fishing hub. One of his books, *Jolputra*, shows the marginalization of the lower-class people. Because *Ramgolam* is a recent text, it has still been almost unexplored in the world of literary criticism. As we see in Bronte's (87) *Wuthering Heights*, an adopted slum-boy Heathcliff turns into a revengeful lover after being rejected by Catherine who holds noble birth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century English society. A contemporary author, Charles Dickens has been sensitive to the subaltern, especially towards the children of 19<sup>th</sup> century England where the lower class is denied from their rights. Dickens (58) reveals the orphan protagonist Pip's prolonged evolution in becoming a gentleman from a forge in the marshes of England. So, it can be comparable with *Ramgolam*, because we can see that in *Ramgolam* Chamanlal who wants to live together with their children. He says that "At your wife's suggestion are you planning to rent a house in the Gentleman's locality? Will you live there in incognito? but one day or other your identity will be known" (Jaladas 102). We see Pip goes to the palace of Miss Havisham, and later he moves to London to become a 'gentleman'.

### III. Discussion

The name of *Ramgolam* exposes the profound dilemma for the subaltern. As he gets curious about his name in the beginning of the fiction, Jaladas reveals the veiled mystery of the Harijans where they want to be something which they are not. The word 'Ram' comes from the Hindu scriptures, and the word 'Golam' is derived from the religion Islam. Though the grandfather retells the story of naming *Ramgolam*, the author implies a positive spirit of humanity through diminishing the interreligious and intra-religious differences imposed by society. At the same time, 'Golam' also is ambiguous with its second meaning 'servant' which has been practiced since the time of British colonization with its expansion in serving the upper class by the lower class. With a juxtaposition of words taken from the two major communities- the Hindus and the Muslims, Sheucharan has probably wanted to unite the society rather than divide. Being oppressed, by numerous manipulators, from ages, he does not have the ignition to fight an uneven battle against religion-driven disparity. Rather, he has cherished the hope for inclusiveness for the future generation. However, *Ramgolam* ignites the long-cherished fire

Moreover, the animal imagery is also significantly visible through the word 'crow'. As a cleaner of nature, the crow is not much appreciated but needed only. It cleanses the environment making itself dirty. Anjali also alters the words 'foxes and pigs' to compare their life with animals. As mentioned earlier, the image of 'pig' is used by Anand in his book *Untouchable*. Likewise, the scavengers risk their own health and hygiene where they keep the environment safe and healthy for the civilized, the so-called 'gentlemen'. Ironically, the world of gentlemen does not pose the gentleness, and creates newer hurdles for the Harijan community. *Ramgolam* works for the inclusion of his community in the job they do not like to do but they have no choice. The marginalization process goes from physical space to scope of work. Their work is hated by many, maybe even by themselves, as they have to live with 'shits'. But unfortunately, this last option of earning bread and butter has been threatened by the decision from the gentlemen's authorities. The subaltern has no voices, and even though *Ramgolam* raises it meekly with his limited knowledge and wisdom, it does not find the changed reality. Comparing with birds and animals reflects the implication sub-human life that leads to dehumanization of the scavengers.

*Ramgolam* has shown that reputation concerns affected the impact of receiving respect. When concerns for reputation were strong, respect affected people's emotional response and their self-esteem to a larger extent. This supports the notion that people value respect because respect caters to reputational concerns. He said, "We are a very unfortunate race. To the Hindus we are untouchable. We are an unholy race. Not just our touch, even if a Hindu or a Brahmin steps on our shadow, he gets contaminated. It is a heinous sin for them" (Jaladas 11). In *Ramgolam*, Jaladas attempts to reexamine the religious deception and political mischief which have disseminated casteism and untouchability. He skillfully juxtaposes the Harijan subjectivity and the distressing presence of the establishment, the corporation officers who protect and promote the upper class.

There Shaktilal, son of Chaman Lal, finds life-force in Radhika who is his wife. After earning enough money, they decide to move from the methar colonies. They think they can live with high classes in large city hiding their identity. So, we can see that people who are interested in hiding their identity will come from low classes. The scavengers start hating themselves when they realize the crisis. With their identity as 'untouchable', they are limited in work opportunities. At the same time, the crisis intensifies with the decision from the local

city corporation of employing people from other classes in this sector. After that, they have to go back to the village. The narrative discloses the reality of living in ghettos as the society creates shanty housing in slums where animals are more dominant than humans. The Gurucharan family lives like prisoners crammed against one another in a small room after Sheucharan's marriage and Ramgolam's birth. One night, Anjali finds that Sheucharan fails to be intimate with his wife due to inadequate space. She sighs deeply, and vainly attempts to soothe her anguished mind: "Is this life? The life of foxes and dogs! (Jaladas 59). The subaltern is deprived of usual human rights and living practices. Even they do not have enough space for having physical intercourse which implies the unsafe and unwanted birth of new members in scavenger families. They have no privacy, and they are denied of having normal physical intimacy. They cannot live with enough space, and they cannot even leave the word freely. In addition, the author gives the novel a different dimension by often alluding to Hindu mythologies particularly the Mahabharata and Monusonghita. Brahma, the supreme God in Hindu tradition, is said to have created the Shudra from his body dust to clean the filths and shit of the upper class. From the very creation till date, these people have been denied human rights and have lived like outcasts. Ovaghir Shorgo also has included some information about caste. A Brahmin says that "Who when burns in your caste? Go bury on the bank of the river. Look, Pondit Moshai, these people want to be Brahman."(Ovaghir Shorgo 00:45:10-00:45:25) After Gurucharan's death, when his body was taken to a nearby crematorium, a drunkard henchman of the upper class stops Ramgolam and his bereaved fellows, and ordered them to go elsewhere as this crematorium was only for the upper class corpses. At the crematorium, Ramadas says, "You are Methar. This spot isn't for you. It is reserved for the Babus. You will burn dead bodies over there. There is one other thing, to burn the dead body you have to pay a fee of Taka 250" (Jaladas 110).

In a country like Bangladesh, employment opportunities have always been limited since independence. Moreover, the job of scavengers cannot be done by other sections of the society. Cleaning the shits and carrying the image created by the society is part of dehumanization process imposed upon the Harijans. In addition, creating competitions in the limited job opportunities, by including other communities, poses newer challenges of survival. Eventually, this looms large on the scavengers as they have not been facilitated with education or other trade skills that might be some options for their next generations. Ramgolam is the only ringleader who tries to fight against a wall that is too high to overcome. Eventually, this brings disaster for himself and his community.

Nowadays the countries are not able to ensure equal rights and opportunities for the have-nots. The working-class people wait for the new opportunities to be created and offered for jobs. However, the opposite happens to the Harijans. The Harijans live subhuman lives. Insufficient accommodation, social rejection, sexual harassments and excessive alcohol consumption feature their life. What is most distressing is that they are denied access to burial grounds. One day Gurucharan shares his life experience with Kartik that they live like crows. Gurucharan utters, "We are like the crows" (Jaladas 65). Jaladas implies that early hours, both the methars and crows jump into the dustbins. The crows feast upon the human shit, the methars carry them on their head, and proceed to dump them into the well. The only difference is that the crows are free, the methars aren't. Here, I would give a few instances that make us visualize their sufferings and feel the streak of pain that runs through their collective experience. Again, in Jalputro according to Jaladas (16), fisherman's family is like a frog's family. Like frogs, fishermen in Bangladesh have to rely completely on nature's blessing especially they can survive during the rainy season. Ironically, the rainy season is also challenging for them with uncertainty in the story sea and overflowing situations on the banks where they live.

#### IV. Conclusion

Harshakar Jaladas, like his creation Ramgolam, is also an unheard voice in the arena of literature. In his narratives, he pens for the marginalized people who have no voices in the mainstream society. With his graphic description, slums turn into the melting pot of world's harsh reality of the universal struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed.

The picture of dehumanization is presented in the novel, is on the one hand, appreciated for Harishankar's art of narration and on the other hand makes the reader compassionate for the ill treatment with the untouchables. So it can be said that Harishankar Jaladas has used his imagination and creative skill to transform facts into fiction to present a realistic vision. Harishankar Jaladas as social critic conveys a strong message through his novel Ramgolam and raises the voice against caste segregation in the Bangladesh society. He echoed the real situation of Subalterns, their mentality and reality. In the Bangladeshi cultural context, subalternity occurs on the basis of caste, class and gender.

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