

## Interrogating the Stereotype: A Critique of Caste and Gender in Narendranath Mitra's *The Substitute (Bikalpa)*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Narendranath Mitra's short story *Bikalpa*, translated into English by Sreejata Guha as *The Substitute*. The paper discusses *The Substitute*, as a Critique of Caste and Gender. Through the discussion of this story, this paper attempts to interrogate the stereotypical notions regarding caste and gender. Although after the Bengali renaissance Casteism in Bengal saw a significant fall in terms of its practice in the society, nevertheless it still persisted in the minds and psyche of the people. Narendranath Mitra's *The Substitute* is a serious rendering of this stereotypical ethos of the upper castes of Bengali society. The arguments of this paper will be developed in the light of the key ideas given by the sociologists such as, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Uma Chakraborty, Sharmila Rege and Arundhati Roy.

Keywords: Stereotype, Caste, Gender.

### INTRODUCTION

Narendranath Mitra's *The substitute*, a Bengali story translated into English by Sreejata Guha, is the story about a Bengali lower middle-class Brahmin family comprising a daughter Sudha, her younger brother Habul and her father Hargobindo. The two significant features which help us to understand the intersections between gender and caste are the Brahminical patriarchy and the endogamy and both of these elements are found in this story. Mitra has very aptly portrayed a lower middle-class female character named Sudha, who is playing the role based on her gender and social strata. She is also the victim of caste system, which in India has remained an important factor of social stratification and which only supports endogamy. She falls in love with a private tutor Indhubhusan who belongs to the so called lower caste. In the Indian societies, along with gender stratification, the caste system is deeply rooted in the society. Caste is decided on the basis of birth of an individual in a particular group at the time of one's birth and goes all along the life of an individual.

Although after the Bengali renaissance Casteism in Bengal saw a significant fall in terms of its practice in the society, nevertheless it still persisted in the minds and psyche of the people. This is seen when on one hand Sudha falls in love with Indubhushan and also serves him the meal, whereas, on the other hand, her father was furious that how Indubhushan, belonging to the lower caste, can think of marrying a Brahmin girl. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, father of Indian constitution, who himself was victim of caste system and experienced the caste discrimination right from his childhood, played an important role in the upliftment of downtrodden. He believed that, "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life." (Ambedkar, November 25, 1949) He tried to abolish the caste system but, the notions of caste and class still occupy the minds of people and continue to persist in the society.

Uma Chakraborty in her book, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens*, has examined the crucial linkages between caste and gender. She has powerfully unmasked that how women are considered as the gateways of the caste system and also uphold the honour of family and any deviation from the social code is not accepted by the society. According to her, "The subordination of women and the control of female sexuality by means of endogamy are crucial to the maintenance of caste system, creating what feminist scholars have termed Brahmanical Patriarchy." (Chakraborty, Publisher's summary). The short stories written by Bengali writers after the partition have portrayed woman with domestic works assigned to her. In this story, Sudha is the daughter of Hargobindo who performs all her domestic duties and after the death of her mother showers her tender care upon her younger brother Habul. The reasons why she left her school are unknown, but she wants her younger brother to continue his studies. Hargobindo works hard to see his children happy. His all savings were for the marriage of his daughter. He would always try to help his daughter. His only aim was to find an excellent groom and good household for his daughter. However, the stereotypical belief regarding gender and cast prevailed in his mind and are reflected, when he says to his daughter that, "Born a woman, there will be so much you will have to endure. But as long as I am your father, I will not allow even the slightest scratch to mar you." (Mitra, *The Substitute*) For him, his daughter was a "debt" which was to be paid off. The story therefore reflects the stereotypical belief that the daughters are nothing but a financial burden for the father. Hargobindo only believes in the Brahmanical patriarchy and the endogamy. He desires for a groom for his daughter who should be both physically as well as mentally perfect. Without knowing the emotions of his daughter, he plans everything in his mind regarding his son-in-law.

Sharmila Rege, by means of her books such as *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought*, *Writing Caste*, *Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonial* and several essays, has explored the effects of "patriarchy and caste oppression." Her writings are reflective of the intersection of gender and caste and also that "the patriarchy here is about caste and about keeping its hierarchies intact." (Trivedi, "The Hindu" June 2013)

Rege has used the Ambedkar's definition of "caste as endogamous class sustained through control over the woman's sexual and reproductive activities". (Ananya,

Feminismindia.com). Man and woman belonging to a particular caste need to follow and to embody the ideology of honour for particular caste. The friendship between Indubhushan and Sudha became the matter of gossip among the people in the vicinity and “The fact that Sudha was having an interaction with another man, other than her father or brother, was reason enough for the entire building to come storming into her home, bursting with questions.” (Mitra, *The Substitute*) The hatred inside Hargobindo for Indubhushan, who was both socially as well as economically of a lower class having no relatives and also an orphan, resulted into such a severe punishment which leads to his tragic death.

Arundhati Roy’s Introduction titled, *The Doctor and the Saint* to B.R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* is an annotated critical edition. It features a comprehensive introduction by Arundhati Roy and in an interview, in “Outlook” she says, “Caste is at the heart of the rot in our society. Quite apart from what it has done to the subordinated castes, it has corroded the moral core of the privileged castes. We need to take Ambedkar seriously.” (Roy, Outlook, March 2014)

What happens in the story after the death of Indubhushan is a serious castigation of the practice of casteism. This death effects Sudha very deeply and she is emotionally wrecked. She starts dressing like a widow and stops using any ornaments. The books gifted by Indubhushan were her only companion. She also starts having the vegetarian meal only and soon the house turns into an island of three different people, this upsets her father badly. Hargobindo only wanted to punish Indubhushan and his intension was not to kill him. He along with his family leaves the place where they were living. He tried everything to bring the happiness of his daughter back to her but all goes futile. The plight of his daughter effected Hargobindo to the extent that towards the end of the story, he is in search of another private tutor for his son instead of a match for his daughter. The story ends with a hope that the new tutor may again give the life to lifeless Sudha and become a substitute for indhubhushan.

## FINDINGS

- 1.The stereotypical notions regarding caste and gender still weigh heavily on the minds of Indian societies in general and economically backward classes in particular.
2. The practice of endogamy in some of the Indian societies still acts as a major threat to intercaste marriages.
3. The women are still the victim of gender bias. They are considered virtuous as long as they live upto the so called moral standards of the society. The moment they realize their individuality and try to find their own space, they are either suppressed or tortured in the name of so called morality.
4. The people belonging to the so called lower castes of the society who are economically backward are the victims of marginalization at multiple levels. They have to struggle both at the level of class as well as caste.

## Conclusion

*The Substitute* is a very fine exposition of a custom ridden Bengali family torn between the stereotypical notions and the gradually changing social scenario . Hargobindo 's search for a substitute to take his daughter out of her miserable condition after the death of Indubhushan is suggestive of a divide in his mind. A divide created by his social obligations to the customs and his personal realization for a need of change in thinking triggered by his daughter 's plight after the death of Indubhushan . Sudha 's passionate love and commitment to Indubhushan despite all social resistance exposes the vanity of the stereotypical social constructs of caste , class and gender.

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