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# **Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English**

**A Refereed Open Access e journal  
Vol.2/No.2 June, 2017**

**Editor: Saikat Banerjee**

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No2, June, 2017

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Odiya Dalit Poet Writes Back*

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***The Mortgaged Man*, Pitambar Tarai, Translated from the original Odia, Sidhesh Publishing House, Cuttack, 2017, Pages 108, ISBN 978-81-930875-1-0, Rs. 110/-**

Dalit does not signify a particular caste but stands for an awareness of the everyday lived experiences of those human beings belonging to the lowest strata of caste hierarchy in a stratified society in India. The feeling is of oppressed and deprived by the age-old stereotypes. Brahmins made dalits churn the ocean to have *amrit* for them and poison for the dalits. Dalit literature intends to articulate this social, cultural, political and religious oppression perpetrated in this country. “Awareness of this oppression does not simply manifest itself in torrid descriptions of Dalit life. Rather, it attempts to derive out of these experiences a new value system that would help dalits to carve out a new social reality.” (Jatin Bala: 167-68)

No militant movement or rebellion on the part of dalits has taken place in Odisha (like what happened in Maharashtra) which does not negate the suffering and angst of the dalits. One can take a dalit poem and feel the rhythm of distress and anguish arising out of the pain suffering for generations. Pitambar Tarai (b. 1959) is an Odisha Sahitya Academy awarded poet. Many poems in *The Mortgaged Man* is rich in aesthetic responsibility towards life:

“Since childhood I knew



at the north end of our village lie

like two separated brothers

two ancient cremation grounds(.)” (‘Untouchable’, p. 17 )

Another associated aim of dalit literature is the creation of a literary circle that will nurture younger talent and train them to work for dalit liberation. They will usher in a casteless society with one united race inhabiting it – the Indians.

Progressive literature movement aims at the projection of a socialist order, the appeal of Dalit literature lies in its remarkable life force, in the portrayal of the Dalit way of life, their painful lived experiences, the denials they face, the resistance they offer and in the creation of an ideology. If one has to fight against the established social order, then an alternate value system pertaining to the Dalit way of life must first be decided upon. This in turn necessitates a paradigm shift – a cultural revolution. Pitambar writes,

“I am the gate of hell.” ( Woman, 108)

Land is a haunting place for the dalits in India. They are displaced from the mainstream:

“My ancestors had not

Attempted to buy a piece of land” (‘A Piece of Land’, p.37)

Dalit texts are about a movement:

“If you like,

Shoot me with arrow.” ( ‘The Bird’, p. 98 )

So, any work of translation involving these texts is a social engagement. Dalit literary movements emblematis a fight against untouchability and the resultant socio-economic divide. Pitambar in *The Mortgaged Man* writes,



“Oh unredeemed man!

On the outskirts for thousand years (.)” (‘ Man on the Outskirts’, p. 64)

Pitambar’s poetic idioms are subtle, specific and razor-sharp where the poetic corpus retains as an inviting discourse:

“Friends, better not ask

of the house.” (The House, p. 24)

In an Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi Tamil dalit writer/activist Bama Faustima exclaims, “It (Dalit Literature) is the literature of oppressed people It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights.” (*Muse India*, Issue 42, 2012)

Like many contemporary poets from Odisha, Pitambar is an ardent lover of rain and rivers which bring a promise of renewed vitality.

“See , she a serpent

no, never a river.” (‘The River’, p.29)

His aim is to achieve cleansing of the minds by purgation of pent-up feelings and angst. He is a committed artist. His poems remind us poems on rain and rivers by Niranjana Mohanty and Bibhu Padhi. Pitambar is a part of an amazing tradition and legacy of poets.

The aim of dalit literature movement is to facilitate dalit liberation. This journey is just nothing to something. The wheel has started turning. Dalit writers are writing back. We cannot deny the intermingling of thoughts, contexts, engagements and concepts of these



writers, which make them unique. They are aware selves who can think beyond a definite boundary and create their own space.

Pitambar drums up optimism. Some poems in this collection pop up a prophetic note of hope and renewal of humane feelings:

“Wait, Wait

Wait and stop.” ( ‘The River’, p.29 )

Translation is an intimate act of reading. Translation is like transfer of power. Identity is always a kind of representation of oneself to Others. There is a power hierarchy between the *Bhasa* text and the translated one. Emancipation of dalits is constantly on-going movement. It has seen many changes. Translators of this collection from Odiya to English include Jayanta Mahapatra, Panchanan Dalai, Amiya Kumar Patra, Sapan Kumar Jena, Kmal Kumar Mohanty, Bibhudatta Mohanty, Rajendra Das, Namita Nayak, Kishore Panigrahi, and Gobinda Sahoo. Translators have tried to remain close to the texts in original. A good foreword to the book would have given us the background and the immediate literary contexts of the poet and his commitments. Poems in this collection go beyond a predictable tag and attain universality in appeal.

No doubt the reader will not remain indifferent after encountering the poems in this collected volume, *The Mortgaged Man*.

**Notes:**

“Bama Faustina: Conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi”, *Muse India*, 2012. Interview.  
<http://www.museindia.com/viewarticle.asp?myr=2012&issid=45&id=3636>

“Jaydeep Sarangi in Conversation with Jatin Bala”, *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal*, Paperback by Jatin Bala (Author), Jaydeep Sarangi (Editor), Authorspress, New Delhi, 2017.