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## Insidious Interlocking of Gender and Caste: Consequences of Challenging Endogamy

By Mayurakshi Mitra<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The Caste system in the Indian subcontinent is characterized by hierarchy or gradations according to occupational status. The evaluative standard that places a caste higher than others or lower compared to the rest is rooted in the Hindu Dharmashastras. The high and the low are opposed to each other because of their associations with notions of purity and impurity in terms of the nature of their occupations. Since each caste is regarded as a closed group, special emphasis is placed on eating, physical contact, and marriage. Out of these three, the institution of marriage plays a significant role in the preservation of caste order and hierarchy. This paper explores the inextricable link between caste and gender in Indian society and analyses plays of a Bengali Dalit playwright, Raju Das. The paper examines his two plays, *Surjo Tonoy* (Son of Sun) and *Neel Selam* (Blue Salute), and explores the nature of marriages that are considered acceptable in a caste stratified Hindu society and how endogamy is endorsed to maintain the caste order. It also evaluates the consequences of any marriage that fails to comply with the rules of Brahmanical patriarchy, the emotional and physical torture that women in such marriages are subjected to, the ultimate position to which they are reduced, and the social acceptance of the children born out of such marriages. Thereby, the exploration concludes that women in the caste stratified patriarchal society are perceived as gateways to caste order and purity, any step towards flouting the system of endogamy would reduce them to a social position and condition that is morally and emotionally humiliating. Thus, the plays of Raju Das are a clarion call for Dalit women, the unprivileged section, to wake up and resist the oppressive social structures and practices that subjugate them.

*Keywords:* Gender, Caste, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Endogamy, Gender Studies.

### Introduction to Origin of Caste and its Inextricable Link with Gender

India is a socially stratified nation. One of the most significant factors that give the country an identity of a socially stratified nation is caste. The caste system<sup>2</sup> is deeply rooted in many aspects of social life. The socio-cultural norms of different communities find a valid expression through the notion of caste. Though the origin of the caste system has often been attributed to the Aryan invasion of India around 1500 BC and its consequent subjugation of the indigenous non-Aryan population, there are innumerable theories on the origin and nature of caste. According to

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<sup>2</sup> Caste is one of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restrict the occupation of their members and their association with the members of other castes.

Senart<sup>3</sup>, caste is “a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization...” (Mohanty 133). Implicit in Senart’s definition of caste is the ‘idea of pollution’ as a main characteristic of caste. John Nesfield<sup>4</sup> defines caste as “a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their community” (Mohanty 133). Dr. S. V. Ketkar,<sup>5</sup> in his definition of caste, emphasizes two characteristics of caste and observes caste as “a social group having two characteristics: a) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (b) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group” (Mohanty 133). The various definitions of caste reveal that caste is nothing but hierarchically arranged social groups that are based on endogamy<sup>6</sup>. In his essay on caste and gender, titled “On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar”, Nur Yelman argues “a fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women, and ritual quality within it” (Chakravarti, 2004:579). He believes that the three entities—caste, gender, and religious rituals—are structurally linked, and therefore to control either of these, control of female sexuality becomes inevitable because uncontrolled female sexuality can lead to marriages outside the caste, either in the form of *pratiloma*<sup>7</sup> or *anuloma*<sup>8</sup>, both of which can endanger caste purity and identity. M. N. Srinivas<sup>9</sup> too, through his study of the Indian society, draws a link between the caste system and women. It is explicit in his definition of caste:

Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group having traditional associations with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally, maximum commensality occurs within caste. (1968:155)

The two types of marriages, *anuloma* and *pratiloma*, are conceived by caste patriarchy as institutions that risk the caste identity and its purity. *Anuloma* is a marriage between an upper-caste man and a lower caste woman, and though religiously it should not take place, this type of marriage has at least received more religious approval compared to *pratiloma* marriages. A woman in Indian society is considered the custodian of ‘purity’ and by engaging herself in *pratiloma* type of marriage she risks caste and class purity. Therefore, this type of marriage is unacceptable both in

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<sup>3</sup> Senart: Émile Charles Marie *Senart* (26 March 1847 – 21 February 1928) was a French Indologist who wrote extensively on the Indian Caste system.

<sup>4</sup> Nesfield: John Nesfield served in various roles as an educator in British India and was for some time curate of St Michael's Church, Highgate, London. He regarded the caste system as the natural product of the occupational division of Hindu Society

<sup>5</sup> Dr. S.V. Ketkar is known for his study on the Indian caste system and his famous book, *History of the Caste System in India*.

<sup>6</sup> Endogamy is the practice of marrying within a specific social group, caste, or ethnic group, rejecting those from others as unsuitable for marriage or other close personal relationships.

<sup>7</sup> *Pratiloma* refers to the Hypogamy form of Marriage. *Pratiloma* is a type of marital practice in which a man of lower class/caste/varna marries a girl of higher class/caste/varna.

<sup>8</sup> *Anuloma* marriage is a social practice according to which a boy from upper varna/caste/class can marry a girl from lower varna/caste/class.

<sup>9</sup> M. N. Srinivasan is an Indian sociologist and social anthropologist. He is mostly known for his work on caste and caste systems, Social stratification, Sanskritization, and Westernization in southern India and the concept of 'Dominant Caste'.

a religious context as well as social, and if it occurs, it is usually followed by punishment like excommunication and even death.

Caste, as Romila Thapar<sup>10</sup> perceives, has two aspects: theoretical and functional. The theoretical aspect is represented by *varnas*<sup>11</sup>; *jatis*<sup>12</sup> represent the functional aspect of a caste. Thapar further hints at the several implications embedded within this whole formulation of caste. According to her, the first thing that is implied in caste is the system of endogamous marriage, to keep marriages confined within hereditary groups, secondly, the hierarchical division of labor, and thirdly, the idea of ritual purity and impurity (Jaiswal 43). According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar<sup>13</sup>, “Endogamy ...was a fashion in Hindu society and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste, it was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who in their turn became endogamous castes” (Mohanty 133).

It is this feature of the caste system—endogamy—that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar regards as ‘a key to the mystery of the caste system’ (Mohanty 136). In his formulation of caste, it is a system of ‘graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt’ (Chakravarti 2003:7). Endogamy plays the key to the caste system as it “reinforced the religio-cultural framework of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’” (Chakravarti 2003:7). Ambedkar’s sharp gendered understanding of caste stresses the pivotal role of endogamy, both in the making of caste and its perpetuation (Rege 59-71). Thus, it is the notion of endogamy and the need to maintain the religious and cultural framework of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ that marked the beginning of the control on the sexuality of women and their gradual disempowerment.

Endogamy or marrying within a caste is central to the maintenance of caste purity. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the *Annihilation of Caste* saw endogamy at the heart of the caste system and stressed that inter-caste marriage was one way of ridding India of caste. G.S. Ghurye 2000 (1932), Srinivas (1968), Irawati Karve (1961), and Dumont (1972) perceived endogamy as the defining features of caste. Brahmanical patriarchy<sup>14</sup> and endogamy are two important systems that perpetuate caste and gender abuse. Indian society that is structured around Brahmanical patriarchy has a power scheme that is based on caste and gender and is perpetuated through marriages between similar caste families. The purity and pollution of a caste are based on a woman’s sexual conduct. Endogamy or marriage within the same caste functions as the most significant part of the caste system. Hence, a woman is expected to play a vital role in safeguarding the purity of her caste. She is considered the custodian of caste and family honor. Since she has the greatest responsibility of safeguarding the purity of caste order, her sexuality is always kept under strict vigil. Rege’s (2013:20) theoretical revisiting of Ambedkar through a gendered lens and Chakravarti’s (1993) work on Brahminical patriarchy have been pivotal in this respect. Rege (2013) demonstrates, “Ambedkar viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated and sought to move beyond the binaries of sameness/difference” (20). Dr. Ambedkar’s “Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” identifies the links between caste and gender in the most unambiguous terms. He states that the superimposition of endogamy on

<sup>10</sup> Romila Thapar is an Indian historian whose principal area of study is ancient India.

<sup>11</sup> *Varna* is a Sanskrit word with several meanings including type, order, color, or class. It was used to refer to social classes in Hindu texts like the *Manusmriti*.

<sup>12</sup> *Jati* is a group of clans, tribes, communities, and sub-communities, and religions in India. Each *Jāti* typically has an association with a traditional job function or tribe.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, also known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer, who inspired the Dalit Buddhist Movement in India.

<sup>14</sup> *Brahmanical* patriarchy describes the conditions of living in societies that are shaped by gender, caste, and economic relationships, and in turn shape them through our decisions and actions.

exogamy inevitably leads to the creation of caste and analyses how the Brahmins had craftily designed it through controlling their women. The logical demand of endogamy, Ambedkar observes, is the maintenance of a constant sex ratio within a caste. In this schema, a basic crisis arises out of surplus men and women. As he views “[w]ith the traditional superiority of man ... [w]oman has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions...such being the case, you cannot accord the same treatment to a surplus man as you can to a surplus woman...” (2002:248-49).

The system of caste operates on the basis of ‘complete’ control over the beings and bodies of the woman. At the crux of caste lies the structure of marriage, sexuality, and reproduction. This plays a fundamental role in creating and maintaining inequality. Citing *Manu Dharmashastra*<sup>15</sup> Uma Chakravarti draws a link between caste and marriage in her book, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, and observes:

The terms used in the *Manu Dharmashastra* for the two different types of violations of endogamy are significant. *Anuloma*, going with the direction of the hair, is acceptable—men from higher castes can have wives from the lower castes; this is the natural order. In contrast, when a woman from a higher caste has a union with a lower caste male, it is *pratiloma*—against the direction of the hair, it is unnatural; it is not only reprehensible but it is in the inverse order. The true confusion of castes is a consequence of *pratiloma* marriages/unions. (2003:54)

### Dalit Playwright Raju Das as a Critique of Endogamy

The implications and impact of exogamy<sup>16</sup> (*anuloma* and *pratiloma* marriages) in a caste stratified society that endorses endogamous marriages form the main content of two very significant plays of Bengali Dalit playwright, Raju Das. He was born on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1953 in a small village called Ramnagar, in Dhaka district of East Bengal. His famous plays like *Surjo Tonoy* (Son of Sun), *Neel Selam* (Blue Salute), *Kolonko* (Stigma), *Ragging*, and an autobiography titled *The Story of a Rickshawpuller* depict the subjugated, oppressed lives of women, especially the untouchables or the Dalits<sup>17</sup>. They are subjected to systematic exploitation, humiliation, physical assault, and emotional tortures that go unheard, unseen, and unattended. There is a hidden agenda behind subjecting the underprivileged women to such oppression; it is not surprising to know that not only underprivileged women from lower castes are subjected to such oppression, but even women from upper castes too face oppressions that are regarded as necessary for retaining caste purity. According to Raju Das, women—whether they belong to higher castes or lower—are all subjected to oppression and hence are Dalits. According to him, any individual who lives an oppressed, exploited, and subjugated life is a Dalit. Hence, his plays deal with the miserable condition of women, both of upper castes and lower castes, and through their position and status in society, Raju Das tries to bring their Dalit condition to the forefront. Dalit, according to him, is a state of living, a mental state to which one is pushed by completely negating respect, honor, and

<sup>15</sup> *Manu Dharmashastra* or Manusmṛiti is an ancient legal text and constitution among the many Dharmasāstras of Hinduism.

<sup>16</sup> Exogamy is the social norm of marrying outside one's social group.

<sup>17</sup> Dalit is a name for people belonging to the lowest caste in India, characterized as "untouchable". Dalits were excluded from the four-fold *varna* system of Hinduism and were seen as forming a fifth *varna*, also known by the name of *Panchama*.

the basic rights to a respectful living. As a Dalit writer, Raju Das's only aim is to bring a change in the status and position of women, especially Dalit women, by depicting their miserable condition in Indian society. The two select plays, *Surjo Tonoy* and *Neel Selam*, illustrate the condition of the couples who are victims of exogamous marriage. His play *Surjo Tonoy* is *pratiloma* marriage. Since women are considered "the 'gateways' of caste" (Das 1986:135), any woman engaging in hypogamous<sup>18</sup> marriage meets a devastating end, as happens with Alok's mother in *Surjo Tonoy* (Son of Sun). *Surjo Tonoy* is about an upper-caste woman and the unfortunate incidences that take place in her life as a consequence of her hypogamous marriage. *Neel Selam*, on the other hand, depicts the condition of a lower caste woman who engages in a hypergamous<sup>19</sup> marriage with a man belonging to a higher caste. If *Surjo Tonoy* depicts *pratiloma* or hypogamous marriage and its consequences, *Neel Selam* portrays the condition of a woman in *anuloma* or hypergamous marriage. Unlike *pratiloma*, the *anuloma* marriage system is considered to be less harmful to a caste-stratified society like India and therefore comparatively a more acceptable form of marriage; however, women in both types of exogamous marriages become easy victims of caste.

Brahmanical patriarchy and its power play to achieve complete control on the sexuality of women form the essence of *Surjo Tonoy*. In addition to this, the play also portrays the social stigma attached with unmarried motherhood that victimizes unwed mothers like Alok's mother and illegitimate children born out of wedlock, the deplorable social conditions to which they are pushed, and the rigidity of caste conscious Brahmin families. In a way, the play is Raju Das's indictment on the caste-conscious upper-class Brahmins and attacks their ideological belief in Brahminism as the main root cause of all the discrimination and oppression in the society.

### ***Surjo Tonoy* (Son of Sun) and *Neel Selam*: Position of Women in Exogamous Marriage**

Caste and control over women's sexuality in a Hindu Brahmanical society are inextricably linked. As women are considered the "gateways of a caste" (Das, 1986:135) and are held responsible for upholding the honor of the family as well the community, any transgression of patriarchal codes by a woman is meted with violence against women. Consequently, in *Surjo Tonoy* the inter-caste love between Alok's mother and a twenty-five-year-old handsome artist, photographer, and professional in an advertising company gradually turns into a passionate relation leading to her conception of a new life without the wedlock. This is not received harmoniously by Alok's maternal grandfather and his sons. To secure his position as a true Brahmin and also to punish his daughter for violating the social decorum a young woman should observe, Mr. Rasaraj Chakraborty, 'excommunicates the young man' (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 22) and 'throws out his own daughter from their home' (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 22). Through Alok's mother's love with a *Kshatriya*<sup>20</sup> man and consequent series of incidents that make her life so miserable, Raju Das brings out the complex relationship of gender and caste where upper-caste women's compliance with patriarchal order is considered mandatory.

<sup>18</sup> Hypogamy (colloquially referred to as "marrying down") is a term used in social science for the act or practice of a person marrying a spouse of a lower caste or social status than themselves.

<sup>19</sup> Hypergamy (colloquially referred to as "marrying up") is a term used in social science for the act or practice of a person marrying a spouse of a higher caste or social status than themselves.

<sup>20</sup> *Kshatriya* (from Sanskrit *kṣatra*, "rule, authority") is one of the four *varnas* (social orders) of Hindu society, associated with warriorhood.

The relationship of a higher-caste woman with a man of a lower caste draws a web of troubles for Alok's parents. The double trouble of inter-caste alliance coupled with unwed motherhood introduces Alok's mother to a host of hostilities in the hands of the patriarchal, caste-conscious society, headed by her father, Mr. Chakraborty. Alok's father too becomes a victim for transgressing the caste boundaries and daring to establish a relationship with an upper-caste woman. Both of them, as victims of caste order, are separated and subjected to a life of humiliation, pain, and suffering.

Raju Das's other play *Neel Selam* gives another very interesting picture of exogamous marriage. In this play, the protagonist Alodebi, a *shudra*<sup>21</sup> woman, marries a man who belongs to a Brahmin family. Alodebi's marriage to Brahmin Mr. Chatterjee is a typical example of an anuloma marriage. Though it is a love marriage, the spark in their marriage soon fades as Mr. Chatterjee starts blaming his wife and her lower caste as the origin of all the problems in his family, especially the birth of their children with genetic defects. Though either or both the parents can be responsible for any form of genetic defects in children, Mr. Chatterjee refuses to accept the science behind his children's genetic disorder and blames his wife and her lower caste as responsible for his children's birth defects and eventually abandons his wife and children. Intercaste marriage between an upper-caste Brahmin man, Mr. Chatterjee, and a shudra woman, Alodebi, is another instance of exogamous marriage, but not as threatening as a pratiloma marriage. It is quite an acceptable form of marriage in a Brahmanical society, but Raju Das focuses on the condition of women in anuloma marriages. A shudra woman married in an upper caste family, as in this play, often becomes the subject of humiliation and mental and emotional oppression, forced to live a marginalized life in her own family. Hence, Alodebi is constantly teased about her lower caste identity, so much so that her caste is seen as responsible for the genetic defects in their children. In this play, however, there are no instances of honor killing to protect the sexuality of the woman in question or to take revenge on the man who married a lower caste woman. Rather, the woman from a Dalit caste is abandoned post marriage to fend for herself and her children. In her endeavors to get a job to support her family, she becomes the victim of the sexual exploitation of women at the workplace. Through two different cases of exogamous marriages, Raju Das brings home the significance of safeguarding the sexuality of women to retain caste purity. These two plays are not only Raju Das' indictment on the social system of endogamous marriages but the position of women, especially Dalit women in caste stratified Brahmanical society.

### **Violence and Honor Killing: Tools to Regulate Women's Sexuality**

Within upper caste patriarchal society, honor and shame are ideological concepts that are closely linked with the sexuality of a woman. A woman's transgression of caste boundaries is internalized as a matter of shame. Therefore, to stop the news of an upper-caste woman's physical and sexual relationship with a man of a lower caste spreading like wildfire in the society, the girl's father and brother target the man and accuse him of tarnishing the repute of a Brahmin woman. As a punishment for violating the chastity of their daughter, the father-son duo lynches him in public and ultimately excommunicates him so that he is never able to meet his beloved.

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<sup>21</sup> *Shudra* or Shoodra is the lowest ranked of the four varnas of the Hindu caste system and social order in India.

Honor killing<sup>22</sup> is a prevalent way of achieving control over a woman's sexuality and her right to choose her partner. Though in an Indian context, the honor of a family as well as of caste is deeply determined by the conduct of women, both men and women embody notions of honor, but quite differently. While male "honor" rests on their ability to control women's bodies (Welchman and Hossain 21), female honor entails conforming to appropriate and sanctioned roles and codes of conduct (Still 1119-46; Grover 76-116). The "obsessive need for control over women," which Chakravarti (2004:582) sees as central to Brahminical patriarchy, lies at the heart of gendered discourses of honor. She is also regarded as the repository of honor and the man is the regulator of this honor (Chowdhury, 197-237). Alok's mother, by engaging in a hypogamous relationship with a *Kshatriya* man, challenges the role of a woman as a repository of honor. However, since hypogamy is a threat more severe than hypergamous marriage, his maternal kinsmen take up the role of regulators of her honor. Hence, her brothers who shared close nexus with a local political party attempt to murder him to remove the last sign of a man who brought social disrepute to their family.

According to Manu, the sexuality of women is the root cause of evil in a social system. It is evident in the derogatory observation that he draws on the character of women and links it with the necessity to control women's sexuality, "A woman must particularly be guarded against her evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow onto two families" (Buhler 328). The role of male family members as regulators of honor is strengthened by Manu's expectations of the role of male family members. He argues that male family members are as much responsible for protecting the chastity of a woman as a woman is herself. Manu, in chapter IX, verse iv, puts significant stress on the duty of men as fathers, husbands, and sons in maintaining the honor of women. According to him, "Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not (his wife in due season), and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after the husband has died" (Buhler 328).

Consequently, the custodians of caste, community, and family honor, the Chakravartis, leave no stones unturned to smother the inter-caste love affair and punish the 'erring' couple. The love affair that was a bone of contention because of caste difference, takes a political turn in the hands of the regulators of honor, Alok's maternal grandfather and uncle. The erring man is caught and murdered for violating the caste order as well as the chastity of an upper-caste woman, and this, in turn, creates a handsome opportunity for the custodians of caste to earn applause for themselves. However, they do not limit themselves only to punishing the erring man, but as true custodians of caste order, they make sure their own daughter/sister is also punished and taught a lesson for defying caste order. She is shown no mercy and thrown out of their home to fend for herself.

### **Defying Endogamy: Consequences of Exogamy on Children**

Closely associated with marriage is procreation, and the type of marriage serves as a tool in determining the social acceptance and position of the children born out of such marriages. The man and the woman in a conjugal relation are metaphorically referred to as the seed and earth respectively, and these metaphors play a significant role in the identity formation of the progeny.

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<sup>22</sup> Honor killing refers to the practice of some castes in Hindus and other religions in India who will kill the daughter if she chooses to marry a person from those castes, inferior in the hierarchy compared to her premarital status, such as Dalits or the "Backward castes".

The symbolic significance of seed and earth in human reproduction is found in Hindu law books. Manu, in chapter IX, verse 34 of *Manusmriti* observes, “In some cases, the seed is more distinguished, and in some the womb of the female; but when both are equal, the offspring is most highly esteemed” (Buhler 333). Further, in his discourse on the function of seed and soil in the same chapter of *Manusmriti*, he establishes the relative significance of the seed over the soil and observes, “On comparing the seed and the receptacle (of the seed), the seed is declared to be more important for the offspring of all created beings is marked by the characteristics of the seed” (Buhler 333). The rule of creating the identity of the progeny by the seed was known as the rule of *Pitra Savarnya*<sup>23</sup>. Manu’s reiteration on the significance of seed is further evident when he says, “Whatever kind of seed is sown in a field, prepared in due season, (a plant) of that same kind, marked with the peculiar qualities of the seed, springs up in it” (Buhler 333).

However, the seed loses its exact significance in offsprings of inter-caste marriages; in both *anuloma* and *pratiloma* types of marriages. In such cases, the male superiority in the seed is tainted by the characteristics of the earth in which it is planted. Thus, in Chapter X, verse 6 of *Manusmriti*, he categorically identifies the types as follows:

Sons begotten by twice-born men on wives of the next lower castes, they declare to be similar (to their fathers, but) blamed on account of the fault (inherent) in their mothers. Such is the eternal law concerning children born of wives one degree lower than their husbands... (qt. in Buhler 403)

Interestingly, the twist that Manu incorporates in *anuloma* or hypergamous marriage by combining this form of marriage with *matra-savarnya*<sup>24</sup> (inheritance of the mother’s *varna*) instead of the prevalent system of inheriting the father’s caste “serves to reveal the differential rules of mating and lineage for men and women of different castes” (Rege 145). Manu skillfully manipulates the identity of progeny born out of exogamous marriage. It also reflects Manu’s sole intention of restricting the offspring to the lower caste. By this change, marriage ceases to be the means of inter-social communication, which it principally is. It relieves men of the higher caste from the responsibility to their children simply because they are born of a mother of a lower caste. It makes *anuloma* marriage a mere matter of sex, humiliation, and insult to the lower castes and a privilege to the higher classes to lawfully commit prostitution with women of the lower classes. From a larger social point of view, it has brought complete isolation among the castes which has been the bane of Hindu Society.

Tambiah, an eminent social anthropologist, in this context argues that though some critics give the progeny the social status of his father, some refuse to do so. Though the offspring of a hypergamous or *anuloma* marriage is socially accepted as a part of their father’s caste, the offspring of hypogamous or *pratiloma* marriage is received neither by the father’s family nor by the mother’s family. Hence, he attempts to explain the paradox existing in hypogamous and hypergamous marriages in the given words:

It seems to me that *pratiloma* is a convenient intellectual device for generating various disapproved categories, assigning them degraded positions, and

<sup>23</sup> *Pitra Savarnya* is a rule existing from very ancient times that determines the status of the child by the *varna*/caste of the father.

<sup>24</sup> *Matra-savarnya* is the opposite of *Pitra Savarnya*, and according to this, the status of the child is determined by the *varna*/caste of the mother.

ideologically explaining, and rationalizing, why so many groups in the caste hierarchy are placed in low or downtrodden positions...though caste society may or may not in its actual demographic composition constitute a pyramid, its evaluation of statuses, ritual and occupational roles must necessarily be pyramidal. The pure statuses are few, the impure are legion. The [political] economy of purity and pollution makes this inevitable. (207)

Consequently, the sufferings of the offsprings of inter-caste marriages start with the discriminatory practices perpetrated by their own families. Unfortunately, it is the child who bears the brunt of the seed and earth dichotomy of exogamous marriages, and he is oppressed as a social outcast.

Alok's predicament as an illegitimate child registers the fate of a child born out of exogamous marriage. Born out of the union of a Brahmin unwed mother and *Kshatriya* father, Alok was neither received by the dead father's family nor by his mother's orthodox, caste-conscious Brahmin family. When Alok's mother returns home after a couple of months with the newborn baby in her arms asking for help, Mr. Chakraborty, instead of extending his helping hand and carrying out the responsibilities of a dutiful father, sticks to his caste-conscious orthodox ideologies and refuses to accept her daughter for committing the sin of transgressing the caste boundaries. The hard-hearted old *Brahmin* hurls down his grandson and makes it clear to his family that a son born out of the union of a *Brahmin* woman and a *Kshatriya* man without marriage is a sinful creation, and therefore, cannot be welcomed by him. Since his birth, Alok suffered social rejection, which has a deep impact on his personality. Though as an infant of only six months, he did not feel the pain of familial rejection when his paternal grandfather hurled him down on the ground, yet the consequences of this unsympathetic act of his grandfather and later to be repeated by society left him disillusioned forever. He lives the life of an outcast. The trauma of social rejection can be best understood when Alok vocalizes his feelings in the given lines:

But I did not die that day when my maternal grandfather hurled me down onto the courtyard. In fact, from that day, I am burdened with a heart full of emotions; I am still living with the pain of dejection and disillusionment. But is that how a person can live? Is that called life? (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 22)

Aside from being a progeny of a union that is hypogamous in nature, Alok also bears the stigma of being the child of an unwed mother. According to *Gautama Dharmasutra*<sup>25</sup> (28:33-34), "the son of an unmarried damsel, the son of a pregnant bride, the son of a twice-married woman, the son of an appointed daughter, a son self-given, and a son bought belong to the family of their fathers" (Jayaram). Thus, as a pure Brahmin, he strongly vouches on the *sastras*<sup>26</sup> and *smritis*<sup>27</sup> and refuses to accept the son born of a maiden woman as an heir to his family. However, *Manavdharmasastra* has an altogether different opinion on children born of inter-caste marriages.

<sup>25</sup> Gautama Dharmasūtra is a Sanskrit text and likely one of the oldest Hindu Dharmasutras (600-200 BCE) whose manuscripts have survived into the modern age. The Gautama Dharmasutra was composed and survives as an independent treatise, unattached to a complete Kalpa-sūtras, but like all Dharmasutras it may have been part of one whose Shrauta- and Grihya-sutras have been lost to history.

<sup>26</sup> Sastra is a Sanskrit word that means "precept, rules, manual, compendium, book or treatise" in a general sense.

<sup>27</sup> Smriti, literally "that which is remembered" is a body of Hindu texts usually attributed to an author, traditionally written down, in contrast to Śrutis considered authorless, that were transmitted verbally across the generations and fixed.

Manu dictates, “From a Sudra man and a Vaisya, Kshatriya, and Brahmana woman are born Ayogava, a Kshatri, and a Chandala respectively, the lowest of men (sons who owe their origin to) a confusion of the castes” (Buhler 276).

The child born to a maiden, according to the *sastras*, can be claimed by the father’s family. But in Alok’s case, since the father is dead, his father’s family never claims him as their heir. Therefore, he grows up with no family name and identity. This complicates the situation in his life, and he blames and traces the roots of his identity crisis to the discriminating caste system that confines man to its limited boundaries and punishes him for transgressing its norms. Raju Das also interrogates the validity of Brahminical ideologies to uphold its beliefs, practices, and expectations in society strangulate human values of love and affection. His attitude towards Brahmins has been put forth through a spokesperson, Alok, who says, “I am not against Brahmins but I detest spurious Brahminism” (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 12).

The social stigma attached to Alok’s life as an illegitimate son of an unmarried mother makes his life a suffocating one. He is socially marginalized because of the absence of a father’s identity in his life. The social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood shadows Alok’s life as well. Raju Das effectively depicts the marginalized condition of Alok by drawing a parallel story of social outcast Karna<sup>28</sup> from the epic *Mahabharata*<sup>29</sup>. Karna had been the victim of caste discrimination as well as of his birth as an illegitimate son of Kunti. Thus, when Alok receives the role of Karna for the drama *Karna Kuntir Sambad*,<sup>30</sup> he identifies himself with Karna and breaks down as he realizes his life as an exact mirror image of Karna, a socially marginalized like Karna living with the burden of an illegitimate son of an unwed mother.

The fate of the handicapped children in *Neel Selam* is no better. Abandoned by their father in their childhood, they were raised by their mother who managed to earn a bare minimum by working under a doctor in a nursing home. The doctor, realizing her financial crisis and helpless situation, sexually exploits her and makes her his mistress. Alodebi too kept silent about her sexual exploitation just for the sake of providing financial support to her children. Her silence did not work long, as her neighbors and society came to know her real situation as a nurse in a hospital. Alodebi and her children gradually became the subject of social humiliation; the children not only grew up under extreme financial pressure, but also lived a stigmatized life of being the children of a doctor’s mistress and were socially ostracized.

## Conclusion

We conclude that casteist Indian society practices endogamy, and woman’s sexuality has been conceived as the gateway to caste order and purity. Endogamy and the offsprings born out of an endogamous marriage both are equally important in a caste stratified society. However, in this case, to maintain the caste order, the independence of women, and their control over their own bodies, has been completely negated. By extending the fruits of endogamous marriage to the

<sup>28</sup> Karna, also known as Vasusena, Anga-raj, and Radheya, is one of the major characters of the Hindu epic Mahābhārata. He is the spiritual son of the Vedic deity-Surya and princess Kunti, and thus a demigod of royal birth.

<sup>29</sup> *The Mahābhārata* is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It narrates the struggle between two groups of cousins in the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the Kaurava and the Pāṇḍava princes and their successors.

<sup>30</sup> *Karna Kuntir Sambad* is Rabindranath Tagore's longer conversational poem, centered upon a dialogue between the valiant Kuru warrior Karna, and his mother, the Queen Kunti, who had once cast the baby Karna. The dialogue raises issues of human morality, ethics, and relationships. Tagore presents Karna as highly ethical, driven by his identification with the neglected and downtrodden, and his shunning all promises of power and wealth.

offsprings born out of it, the scope of reasserting the female body has been subtly denied. The women who dare to challenge these boundaries created by patriarchy face severe consequences of social seclusion and live a stigmatized life. In both cases, it is the independence of women that is contested and constantly interrogated. The detailed study and analysis of the two select plays, *Surjo Tonoy* and *Neel Selam*, in the context of endogamy as a tool to propagate caste order and control the sexuality of women prove the fact that women, irrespective of their caste, are subjected to oppression in a patriarchal, caste stratified society.

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