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## Narendranath Mitra's *Bikalpa (The Substitute)*: A Critique of the Social Constructs of Caste, Class and Gender.

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*This research paper delves into the thematic study of literary work *Bikalpa* authored by Narendranath Mitra, which has been masterfully translated into English by Sreejata Guha under the title *The Substitute*. The primary focus of this paper is to critically analyze "The Substitute" as a profound critique of the entrenched societal constructs of caste, class and gender. By examining this narrative, the paper aims to challenge and probe the deeply ingrained stereotypical perceptions surrounding caste, class and gender. Despite witnessing a substantial decline in the practice of casteism within Bengal following the Bengali renaissance, remnants of this discriminatory mindset continue to persist within the collective consciousness. Narendranath Mitra's *The Substitute* serves as a weighty portrayal of the prevailing stereotypical ethos prevalent among the upper castes of Bengali society. To reinforce the arguments presented in this paper, it draws upon the influential ideas put forth by eminent feminist writers like Simone- de-Beauvoir and sociologists such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Sharmila Rege, Arundhati Roy, and Uma Chakraborty illuminating the discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Caste, Class, Gender, Stereotypical notions, Bengali renaissance.*

### **Introduction:**

Narendranath Mitra's literary masterpiece, *Bikalpa (The Substitute)* a captivating Bengali narrative artfully translated into English by the skilled Sreejata Guha, delves into the intricate tapestry of a Brahmin household ensconced in the realms of the lower middle-class. This poignant tale unearths the entwined threads of gender and caste, casting a revealing light on the enduring dominion of Brahmanical patriarchy and the insidious grip of endogamy, both of which pulsate within its narrative core.

Mitra, in *Bikalpa*, deftly portrays Sudha, a resolute female protagonist hailing from the lower middle-class stratum, skilfully embodying the multifaceted roles dictated by her gender and social standing. Trapped within the clutches of the caste system, an indomitable force perpetuating social

stratification in India, Sudha finds herself entangled in a forbidden love affair with Indhubhusan, a private tutor hailing from the so-called lower caste. The caste system, intrinsically entwined with the fabric of Indian society, coexists alongside the gender hierarchy, bearing witness to the intricate webs of oppression that individuals navigate from birth until death.

While the Bengali renaissance spurred a marked decline in the prevalence of casteism within Bengal, the remnants of this social malaise persisted in the collective consciousness of its people. This becomes evident as Sudha on one hand embrace her love for Indhubhusan and dutifully serve him meals while on the other hand her father seethes with anger at the audacity of a lower-caste individual aspiring to wed a Brahmin girl. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a victim of the caste system himself, whose life was marred by caste discrimination from his very childhood, played a pivotal role in the upliftment of the downtrodden. He fervently espoused the notion that "Political democracy cannot endure without the foundation of social democracy," wherein liberty, equality, and fraternity serve as guiding principles (Ambedkar, November 25, 1949). However, despite his efforts to dismantle the caste system, the vestiges of caste and class continue to permeate the collective psyche and persist within society.

In her groundbreaking work, "Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens," Uma Chakraborty astutely illuminates the interwoven strands of caste and gender, peeling back the layers to reveal the oppressive treatment of women as gatekeepers of the caste system and guardians of familial honour. Any deviation from established social norms is met with societal disapproval. Chakraborty postulates that the subjugation of women and the regulation of female sexuality through endogamy serve as critical pillars upholding the caste system, encapsulating what feminist scholars have aptly termed "Brahmanical Patriarchy" (Chakraborty). . The gender subjugation at large is set up by Patriarchal mindset which leads to the suppressed condition of women wherein the post partition short stories by Bengali writers often cast women in domestic roles as given in Dr. Ravi N. Kadam's research article *Empowerment of Women in India-An Attempt to Fill the Gender Gap* as:

The patriarchal system has confined the women to specific areas such as kitchen and the bed room and fixed gender roles like bearing and rearing children, cooking and cleaning. Even today a woman is viewed as „property“ and not a human being who has her own likes and dislikes. Opportunities for self development are denied to them.

In the realm of *The Substitute*, Narendranath Mitra masterfully weaves together the complex tapestry of gender, Class and caste, inviting readers to contemplate the enduring power dynamics and social structures that shape the lives of individuals like Sudha. Through the lenses of societal critique, historical context, and feminist perspectives, this paper embarks on a thematic exploration, unearthing the profound interconnectedness of gender, caste, and the human experience in Mitra's compelling narrative.

In the thematic exploration of Narendernath Mitra's compelling work, *The Substitute*, Sudha emerges as the progeny of Hargobindo, diligently executing all her domestic responsibilities. Following the demise of her mother, she assumes the role of nurturing her younger sibling, Habul, with unwavering affection. The circumstances that prompted her departure from school remain shrouded in mystery, yet her ardor for her brother's educational pursuits remains resolute. Hargobindo toils relentlessly to ensure his children's happiness, dedicating his entire savings to his daughter's nuptials. He consistently endeavors to support her aspirations, harbouring an unyielding determination to secure an exceptional suitor and a harmonious household. Nonetheless, his mindset succumbs to the conventional biases entrenched in gender and caste, evident in his admonition to Sudha: "As a woman, you shall bear myriad trials, but as your father, I shall not permit even the slightest blemish to taint your being" (Mitra). Here, he also doesn't care about Sudha's individuality as woman but imposes what his social upbringing has been like and the act of providing her jewellery and supporting her in everything but studies or partner selection is a clear example of that which could be reflected from the following lines of Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* as translated by Borde Constance and Sheila Malovant Chevallier as:

In addition, we will pose the problem of feminine destiny quite differently: we will situate woman in a world of values, and we will lend her behavior a dimension of freedom. We think she has to choose between the affirmation of her transcendence and her alienation as object...to play at being a woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object, the Other. (84)

It must be noted that the notions of patriarchy goes along well not only with gender but Hargobindo's character represents a father looking for a Brahmin boy to marry her daughter off, and as a man who is conscious about his class and caste and as the story goes on we could find that all such factors are laying burden on him. When the three of them are planning to move out of the one room rented house in a narrow street to a better place, Hargobindo (Baba) could not afford, as the rent and other deposits and advances are very high. He says:

I think this twenty-rupees' place is fine for our needs. Besides, what shall we do with so much room?'

Sudha laughed and said, 'I knew it. Baba would not move anywhere else.'

Hargobindo replied, 'I will, I will. But let me pay off my debts first before I can put my mind to something else. I can hardly afford to throw away money at this time.'

Both the brother and sister knew what father meant by 'debts'. Habul looked up from his studies and flashed a mischievous smile at his sister, then returned to his reading.

A trifle shyly, Sudha protested, 'Am I just a 'debt' to you, Baba? You always use that same word.'

Hargobindo said, 'Of course it's a 'debt' -- you owe your parents, your siblings and your children some things. But I cannot imagine how I shall live once you are gone.' (Mitra)

Other than the issues of poverty and class, the above extract also highlights the gender discrimination as, Hargobindo, perceives his daughter as a "debt" to be repaid, epitomizing the entrenched belief that daughters are merely financial burdens on their fathers. His convictions align solely with Brahmanical patriarchy. This belief of Baba is further depicted in his admonition to Sudha when she finds herself entangled in a forbidden love affair with Indhubhusan, a private tutor hailing from the so-called lower caste and envisioning an ideal groom for Sudha who embodies impeccable physical and mental attributes. He starts negotiating her marriage: "I have finally agreed to the proposal from Baranagar. There's no point in running after people who are much better off than us. I feel we should not aim too much higher than our own class" (13). Unaware of his daughter's emotions, he orchestrates every detail concerning her prospective husband Baba Says

'Sudha, I am talking to you.'

Sudha replied, 'I have nothing to say, Baba. I think you should just drop all these marriage negotiations.'

'What do you mean by that? Don't you like this proposal? I showed you the boy's photograph, didn't I? He is a good-looking, healthy young man. Even the people at work were full of praise for this proposal.'

Sudha said, 'It's not that, Baba. I just don't want to get married, ever. I'd like to stay here with you always. (Mitra)

This unearths the entwined threads of class, Caste and gender casting a revealing light on the enduring dominion of Brahminical patriarchy and the insidious grip of endogamy. Drawing upon Sharmila Rege's profound literary contributions, such as "Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought," "Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonial," and an array of insightful essays, the pernicious ramifications of "patriarchy and caste oppression" are extensively examined. Rege astutely reveals the intersectionality between gender and caste, emphasizing that "the patriarchy herein encompasses the constraints of caste and the preservation of its hierarchical structure" (Trivedi, "The Hindu," June 2013).

Employing Ambedkar's elucidation of caste as an insular social class sustained by controlling women's sexual and reproductive agency, Rege highlights the necessity for individuals belonging to a particular caste to internalize and embody the tenets of caste honour. The burgeoning friendship between Indubhusan and Sudha becomes a topic of fervent gossip among the local inhabitants, leading to an intrusive influx of inquiries into Sudha's home. Mitra's narrative powerfully encapsulates this pervasive sentiment, remarking, "Sure, don't ever get married. Just flirt with that tutor all day long. The whole neighborhood is talking about it! So tell me, who is the lucky boy

whom you have selected.” The profound animosity harbored within Hargobindo towards Indubhushan, who was situated in a lower social and economic stratum. The caste based differences are the root cause for all such disapprovals because the communal regime in the Bengali society was built to be unwelcoming to the people belonging to different castes or religions.

The society evolved with time but certain things are still debateable same as certain mindsets where women are entitled to marry according to what her tribe tells her and each tribe has different set rules and social mindset regarding what conditions they deem fit for marrying off their daughters as marked in *The Second Sex*,

“Many tribes live under a communal regime: this does not mean that women belong to all the men in the community; it is no longer thought today that promiscuous marriage was ever practiced; but men and women only have a religious, social, and economic existence as a group” (101- 102).

The caste based hatred for Indubushan germinates the hostility in the familial bonding of father daughter relationship as depicted in the following lines:

Hargobindo did not say a word to Sudha. As he drank his tea, he only looked up a few times and gazed at Sudha. The look in those eyes sent a shiver up her spine the first time. But, the second time she was not scared. Her eyes reciprocated by showering hatred and hostility on her father. They forgot that as father and daughter, they had ever shared a sweet communion, loving and respecting one another. It was as if they had always been the greatest of antagonists. (Mitra)

This situation gets more complicated after the sudden and untimely demise of Indubushan. This demise profoundly impacts Sudha, plunging her into an emotional abyss. She adopts the attire of a widow, forsaking the adornment of ornaments. Additionally, she embraces a vegetarian diet, and as a result, the household transforms into an isolated enclave comprising three disparate individuals, deeply unsettling her father. Her father later made every possible effort to console her but fails:

Hargobindo placed his hand gently on his daughter's back. She did not even stir. He said, ‘Sudha, please believe me, darling, I had no idea it would end like this. We just wanted to punish him a little, not put him to death.’

Sudha remained as silent as ever. (Mitra)

Despite employing every conceivable effort to restore his daughter's happiness, all endeavors prove fruitless. The volumes bestowed upon Sudha by Indubhushan remain her sole companions. Consequently, he and his family vacate their previous dwelling. In this context Arundhati Roy's introductory discourse, aptly titled "The Doctor and the Saint," appended to B.R. Ambedkar's monumental work, "Annihilation of Caste," manifests as an annotated critical edition. Within the pages of this tome, Roy expounds comprehensively and, in an interview with "Outlook," she asserts,

Caste serves as the quintessential embodiment of societal decay. Not only has it inflicted immeasurable suffering upon the subordinated castes, but it has also eroded the moral fabric of the privileged castes. It is imperative that we accord due significance to the teachings of Ambedkar. (Roy, Outlook, March 2014).

Subsequent to the demise of Indubhushan, a profound denunciation of the entrenched practice of casteism unfolds within the narrative. The dire circumstances faced by his daughter impact Hargobindo to such an extent that, nearing the story's denouement, he fervently seeks an alternative private tutor for his son, rather than pursuing a suitor for his daughter. The tale concludes on a note of optimism, anticipating that the newly appointed tutor may resurrect the dormant vitality within Sudha, effectively supplanting the absence left by Indubhushan.

### Conclusion:

Narendranath Mitra's masterpiece, *The Substitute*, intricately portrays the complexities of a traditional Bengali family grappling with entrenched customs against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving social landscape. Hargobindo's fervent quest to find a replacement for his daughter, trapped in a wretched state following Indubhushan's demise, reflects a profound internal conflict. This conflict stems from the dichotomy between his social obligations dictated by established norms and his personal realization of the urgent need for a paradigm shift, catalyzed by his daughter's distressing circumstances. Sudha's unwavering love and unwavering dedication to Indubhushan, defying societal resistance, boldly exposes the futility of the conventional social constructs pertaining to caste, class, and gender. Mitra's narrative serves as a poignant critique, shedding light on the limitations and hollowness of such rigid frameworks, thereby urging readers to reconsider and transcend these outdated notions. *The Substitute* emerges as a remarkable work of literature that not only captivates but also provokes profound introspection, inviting society to embrace change and embrace a more inclusive and egalitarian future.

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