

Shawkat Ali's Short Stories: An Exquisite Tapestry of Subaltern Voices and the Silent Revolt of the Oppressed

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Abstract

Although measuring literature by decades may not be entirely justifiable, Shawkat Ali (February 12, 1936 – January 25, 2018) firmly stands as a prominent figure of the 1960s. His literary journey stemmed from profound contemplation, with fiction emerging as his chosen medium of expression. In his short stories, the lives, customs, and ideologies of society's underprivileged classes are vividly portrayed. Alongside this, the dynamics of relationships between the upper echelons and the marginalized are intricately woven into his narratives. In the socio-economic and political contexts of the nation, the lower strata of society have historically endured the brunt of neglect and deprivation. Ali's stories resonate with the poignant cries, agonizing despair, and profound helplessness of these marginalized communities. Moreover, he explores the social crises and economic disparities that plagued the nation in the post-independence era. His narratives delve into the experiences of various societal groups, particularly the marginalized. Works such as *Unmul Bashona* (1968), *Lelihan Shadh* (1978), *Shuno he Lokkhindor* (1988) offer diverse representations of these social inequalities. Among the aforementioned stories, this essay examines depictions of exploitation and oppression of the lower classes by the elite. These stories, set against the backdrop of Bangladesh, significantly reflect the influence of "Subaltern Theory". This discussion endeavors to analyze the lifestyle, customs, and ideologies of the marginalized under the lens of Subaltern Studies, shedding light on their lived realities and cultural ethos in the context of socio-economic disparity.

Keywords: *Shawkat Ali, Subaltern Studies, Marginalized Communities, Decolonial Narratives, Rural Bengal, Social Hierarchies, Cultural Hegemony, Subaltern Consciousness, Literature of Protest, Identity and Resistance*

Introduction

The advent of the industrial age sparked a wave of conflict, shock, and sorrow in the human psyche, which was reflected in the short story. During the capitalist era, following the French intellectual revolution, short stories began to depict the fragmented lives of the bourgeois class. The inevitable tension between the emerging middle class's affluence and growth played a key role in the emergence and development of the short story as a literary form. The late nineteenth century created an environment in Bengal that was ripe for the rise of the short story, which, like its European counterparts, began to make its mark in Bengali literature.

This remarkable evolution owes itself to the visionary dedication of literary giants such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971), Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (1894-1950), and Manik Bandopadhyay (1908-1956), whose works have garnered global acclaim. In Bangladesh, the 1960s,

70s, and 80s witnessed an explosion of literary brilliance, with masterful storytellers like Syed Waliullah (1922-1971), Hasan Azizul Haq (1939-2021), Syed Shamsul Haq (1935-2016), Akhtaruzzaman Elias (1943-1997), Shahidul Zahir (1953-2008), and Shawkat Ali (1936-2018) breathing life into timeless tales that continue to resonate across generations. Their narratives, brimming with insight and emotion, have not only shaped the landscape of Bengali literature but have elevated it to a universal stage.

In Bengali literature, the depiction of the lower class's diverse lives is brought to life with unparalleled skill by writers like Manik, Tarashankar, and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and so on. against the backdrop of the shifting socio-economic and cultural landscape of the twentieth century, their works have become vibrant expressions of new social thought, crafted with artistic brilliance. These authors, aligning with subaltern historians who define the lower class, have intricately portrayed their subjects in the fullness of their material experiences and inner emotions. The stories immerse us in the lives of those deemed socially inferior or ordinary—those invisible to the upper class—capturing their primal instincts, behaviors that defy societal norms concerning men and women, and the exploitation they endure from the elite. Through their acts of resistance and rebellion, alongside their distinctive customs, ways of life, and cultural practices, these works reveal the rich and multifaceted identity of the subaltern in all its complexity.

In the realm of storytelling, Shawkat Ali's aesthetic brilliance and enduring influence remain undeniable. Through a masterful interplay of vivid realism, profound historical and political insight, deep perception, and subtle wit, he established Bengali prose literature on a formidable foundation. This unique amalgamation endowed his works with an exceptional brilliance and distinction. Shawkat Ali stands as one of the foremost figures who established a literature grounded in social realism. The period during which Shawkat Ali matured and shaped himself as a servant of literature coincided with a crucial era marked by social, political, and cultural upheavals. Events such as the World War, the Partition, communal conflicts, famines, crises regarding the mother tongue and state language, and the profound impact on national consciousness greatly influenced his artistic psyche. As time passed, he internalized an acute sense of humanism, the unbearable pain of dislocation from ancestral traditions, and the harsh truths of sectarianism and neighborly slaughter. From his experiences, he realized that deceit, greed, oppression, and murder are not the ultimate truths of life; rather, behind the catastrophic destruction and turmoil, hope and the continuity of creative spirit steadfastly endure. Shawkat Ali reflects on the circumstances that shaped his journey as a writer:

While teaching at Thakurgaon College, I enjoyed interacting with the poor, agrarian people of the region, particularly the indigenous Rajbanshi and Sawtal communities. During my travels between Thakurgaon and Dinajpur, I became familiar with bus drivers and helpers, forming friendships with many of them. Through my professional life and my growing closeness to the working class, I developed the realization that we, the so-called gentlefolk, are distinctly different from them. Their way of thinking, their lifestyle, everything is different, and often remains beyond our comprehension. Yet, it is upon them that the entire fabric of society stands. (Ali, 2016: 7)

The path to widespread popularity remained irrelevant to him. With the serene focus of an ancient sage, he devoted himself solely to the pursuit of literature. Like his like-minded friend Akhtaruzzaman Elias, who was a deeply experimental writer, Shaukat Ali also embodied a similar literary ethos. Both were firm believers in leftist ideologies. However, this personal belief did not overtly manifest in their literary works.

“Subaltern studies” has emerged as a much-discussed phenomenon in contemporary discourse. Extending beyond the domains of history and sociology, it has now claimed significant ground in literary discussions as well. Originating from historical and sociological deliberations, the term “subaltern” has evolved into a theoretical framework. The concept of “subaltern” in sociological discussions traces its roots to Marxist discourse. During his imprisonment under the Fascist regime, Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) skillfully employed the term “subaltern” as a metaphorical substitute for the proletariat in his renowned Prison Notebooks (written between 1929 and 1935), circumventing Mussolini's surveillance. In its broader sense, this term referred to the working class oppressed under Italy's capitalist system.

In military terminology, “subaltern” denoted subordinate officers serving under a higher-ranking officer, often a captain. Its usage, therefore, implied connotations of subordination or inferiority. In essence, “subaltern” signifies those positioned beneath or subordinate to others. Aristotle's treatises also defined “subaltern” as a proposition subordinate to another, lacking universality or absoluteness.

In Prison Notebooks, Gramsci employed metaphorical language to articulate his interpretations of Marxist theories, carefully evading Fascist scrutiny. This process of employing metaphors allowed him to create nuanced and original perspectives on traditional Marxist thought. Gramsci's terminology included substituting the conventional Marxist terms “bourgeois” and “proletariat” with “hegemonic” and “subaltern”, respectively. Furthermore, he replaced “Marxist philosophy” with “philosophy of praxis”. For Gramsci, the Italian word ‘subalterno’ primarily signified the working class. In an economy-driven capitalist society, the ruling class occupies the apex of power, while the working class remains relegated to a subordinate, or subaltern, position.

He demonstrated that the relationship between dominance and subordination, the dynamics between rulers and the ruled, and between the oppressors and the oppressed, are perpetually antagonistic. According to Gramsci, it is the authority of the “hegemonic” class, positioned in opposition to the “subaltern” class, that subjugates and governs the latter. Not only does the hegemonic class assert its dominance through state apparatus, but it also maintains its authority in the realm of cultural ideologies. Furthermore, in the social power structure, the class that establishes dominance, becoming the dominant force, is always opposed by the “subaltern” class. Gramsci showed that, despite their dependence, the subaltern class occasionally rises in protest and resistance, and it is precisely at these moments that the hegemonic power faces the looming threat of danger.

Spivak has profoundly complicated the concept of Subaltern Studies by critiquing its established conventions. She sought to formulate her own theory of subalternity, one that questions the very possibility of a subaltern voice being heard. In contrast to Gramsci's vision of subaltern autonomy, Spivak forcefully argues that the subaltern can never transcend their position. They remain forever relegated to the margins, inaccessible, unreachable, and unheard. The barriers of unapproachability ensure that the subaltern's voice is silenced, unable to break through to the ears of the elite. (Seldon, 2006: 24)

Methodology

The research paper employs a textual analysis methodology to examine Shawkat Ali's short stories, integrating narrative analysis with a profound engagement with subaltern theory. This methodological framework has been chosen for its efficacy in analyzing the thematic elements, character portrayals, and the ideological

perspectives of the author. Through narrative analysis, the study explicates how the subaltern is represented within the stories and how these representations align with the author's ideological outlook. Specifically, the research critically examines the struggles, systemic inequities, and the harsh realities of subaltern life as portrayed in Shawkat Ali's narratives. This textual analysis approach resonates with the research focus and aligns seamlessly with the narrative strategies employed by the author. Consequently, the study effectively underscores the lived realities of marginalized classes and their articulation through the lens of subaltern theory, reflecting their profound correspondence with the author's literary vision.

In the stories of Shawkat Ali, the socio-economic and political dynamics of Bangladesh are intricately depicted, portraying a conflict-ridden society and its evolutionary trajectory. Despite his firm belief in Marxist ideology, he was not overtly inclined to directly implement socialist literary ideals in addressing the emancipation of the working class. By maintaining the core essence of Bangladesh's societal transformation, Shawkat Ali endeavored to unravel the threads of social inequality, class exploitation, and the disparities inherent in systems of production and distribution. His class consciousness is deeply interwoven, much like an organic component, with the overarching power structures of society. Embedded within this framework lies the distilled essence of Ali's reflections on humanity.

Although steadfast in his faith in dialectical materialism, his literary oeuvre seldom advocates revolutionary societal upheaval. For him, communism was perceived as a form of common sense, while the idea of equitable resource distribution seemed an inherently natural proposition. Despite his affiliation with intellectual circles, Shawkat Ali did not confine himself within the rigid parameters of Marxist theoretical frameworks. Instead of theoretical abstractions, he consistently sought to remain anchored to the realities of life. The essence of Marxist literary ideals—the defense of laborers' rights and the assertion of their dignity—found expression in his creative endeavors rather than theoretical impositions. His comprehensive understanding of the lives he sought to represent in his literature shielded him from being ensnared by theoretical constructs.

Indeed, no veneer of doctrinal practice overshadowed his writings. With the impartial gaze of an artist, he transformed the totality of life into a literary and artistic narrative. While he opposed the direct construction of Marxist theoretical literature, his political consciousness as a writer rendered the influence of political ideologies inevitable in his works. At this juncture, the exploration of how class struggles and subaltern theories manifest in his stories becomes imperative for a thorough examination and critique.

The narrative fabric of stories like *Unmul Bashona's* (1968) 'Rangini', 'Phaguar Por', 'Pushna', 'Tritiyo Ratri', 'Ferta', 'Bikolango Pipasha', and 'Dain' intricately interweaves the relationships between men and women, revealing a nuanced tapestry of social dynamics. These relationships are fundamentally rooted in the larger framework of societal structures where men and women, entrenched in their respective social classes, become easy victims of social injustice and economic exploitation. Among them, women from subaltern classes are doubly marginalized—first as members of the lower class, and second due to their gender. As noted by the renowned theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Spivak, 1988: 306)

The family life in such societies is governed by the dominance of the upper classes and male authority. However, in some instances, women from the subaltern classes display a degree of independence in their movements.

Shawkat Ali's stories vividly depict the complexities of subaltern women's existence, even under male domination, highlighting their multifaceted identities. This gives rise to a multidimensional dynamic in the relationships between subaltern men and women. The narratives explore themes of love, sexuality, primal instincts, the pain of union and separation in marital life, and the complexities of relationships that exist beyond the bounds of societal and moral conventions. In doing so, Shawkat Ali presents a unique cultural landscape for the subaltern men and women. Page | 74

The physical desires and primal urges of biological life form the central relationships between men and women in Shawkat Ali's narratives. Rather than seeking out the most profound theories of human connection, he engages with 'Human Naturalism' as a pragmatic observer, portraying the relationship in its most raw form. However, Shawkat Ali does not merely prioritize physical desires; he also gives significant attention to the economic and social positions of the subalterns, carefully examining their class identities. Even within the same social stratum, gender differences between men and women remain evident in many of his stories. Through his plots, the oppression, deprivation, and sexual exploitation of subaltern women in male-dominated societies become deeply significant.

In essence, the relationships between men and women within the subaltern class are marked by a distinctiveness that highlights their unique interactions. Shawkat Ali's stories frequently focus on the primal relationships between subaltern men and women, providing a lens through which their lifestyles and values are examined. Understanding this defining characteristic of subaltern identities is crucial. In Shawkat Ali's narratives, the relationships between subaltern men and women are framed predominantly by two themes: traditional marital love and the allure of extra-marital love. Notably, it is the depiction of extra-marital relationships that takes precedence, as many of his stories explore the fervent and often forbidden love driven by innate biological desires.

In Shawkat Ali's story '**Sojarasta**', the internal conflict between the famine-stricken, starving people of North Bengal and the upper-class elite is vividly revealed. At the beginning of the story, it is evident that due to the famine, many in the impoverished class have sold their homesteads and left the village in search of livelihood. For the day laborers, famine becomes a terrible curse. Many die not only from lack of food but also due to the absence of medical care. Desperate in the face of the famine, a father tries to mortgage his young daughter to a moneylender in exchange for food. Even in such extreme times, the wealth of the moneylender class continues to grow.

Meanwhile, under the 'Food for Work' program, a new road is planned for construction. Under the guise of developing the village with a new road, the powerful elite devise a cunning conspiracy. Torap Mia, Dholu Mondol, Jamal Uddin Munshi, and Kana Chowdhury create a map for a supposedly straight road, which is in fact crooked and complex. In essence, the moneylenders secretly plan to build the road over the lands and homes of the landless and laboring class, rather than through their own estates and properties. In this regard, the insights of Dipesh Chakrabarty is particularly significant. He posited, "In capitalist economies, laborers are frequently seen not as humans with individual rights but as tools for profit, leading to their subaltern status beneath the economic elite" (Chakrabarty, 1989: 23).

The plan to use the labor of the hungry to destroy their own homesteads and create a road never comes to fruition. The wealthy class, in an attempt to protect their rice barns and solid homes, ultimately spring into action by setting a treacherous trap. However, when the laborers and poor understand the deceit, they unite and stand firm, holding their spades with the intent to construct the road through the estates of the wealthy. This moment ignites a revolutionary fervor among the unified people:

The road will cut through the Sarkar's rice barn, through the courtyard of the Mondol house, and across the solid ground of the Chowdhury house. If the soil is dug this way, the road will indeed be straight. The people examine the path ahead to be sure. Then, they join hands and lift their spades into the air together, and at that moment, the raised blades of the spades gleam fiercely in the scorching heat of the angry Chaitra sun. (Ali, 2016: 114)

'**Rangini**' stands as Shawkat Ali's inaugural story, wherein the post-partition societal and familial decay, the opacity of national economics, the psychological disintegration of individuals, male perceptions of women, the profound existential void experienced by women, and the eventual moral awakening of even the most reprehensible individuals are meticulously delineated within the narrow confines of life's crises. The narrative subtly weaves the nation's turmoil, the fallacies within society, and the internal mental turmoil against the backdrop of the disjointed lives of Notbor and Mistry(labour), both involved in smuggling and beset by personal disarray. The canvas of the story progresses and concludes through the evolving thoughts, emotions, and tensions of three principal characters, whose interactions with Rangila, a woman of profound allure, become a focal point of attraction, betrayal, revenge, greed, fear, and ultimately, emotional catharsis. The atmosphere is set within a time of prolonged, tedious, and fear-laden delay due to rain, during which a truckload of goods is being smuggled across the border. Both Notbor, the merchant, and Mistry(labour), the truck driver, are ensnared by the seductive charm of Rangila, the wife of a bandit. The narrator further illustrates Mistry's obsession with social status through his carefully curated attire and fragrant cigarettes, thereby exposing the male-driven lust for the female form:

God alone knows what resides within a woman's body. It is the greatest of all addictions. When a man is drawn into this obsession, no power remains for judgment, reason, or contemplation. At that moment, there is no distinction between man and beast. My work, my future, my ambitions, my longing for happiness, and my greed for profit—all become inextricably tangled. (Ali, 2016: 28)

Notbor, the businessman, is portrayed as a family-averse, woman-objectifying, and hedonistic individual. His existence revolves around indulgence in fleeting pleasures, with a preoccupation for transient relationships and excessive drinking, all the while distancing himself from familial ties and responsibilities. His life, devoid of any true connection to home or family, exists in a state of recklessness, consumed by desires beyond the national borders. The allusion to V. Patriarchy is particularly germane in this context, "The figure of the subaltern woman is doubly marginalized, caught within the boundaries of both gender and class, as her experiences are seldom acknowledged in dominant histories." (Geetha, 2008: 89)

Furthermore, the manifold complexities of the newly formed state's socio-political landscape profoundly impact Notbor's existence, inflicting upon him a pervasive sense of discomfort. Within the web of divisive ideologies, we perceive the unsettling undercurrents of economic uncertainty, isolation, and the wearisome monotony that marks Notbor's life.

Rangini, after tricking the truck driver Mistry and Natbar, uses her husband to steal from Natbar's shop. On one hand, the story reveals the corrupt dealings of the village businessmen, and on the other, it highlights

Rangini's cunning, her husband's thievery, and Natbar's involvement in smuggling—together painting a picture of rural life in a particular era. In the story '**Phaguar Por**', the life of Sukhlal is described thus:

It will still be a while before the mad wind collapses onto the yard. Occasionally, a faint breeze blows, scattering reddish neem leaves across the yard. There used to be a thicket of jhumko vines on the fence; now, the dense green leaves no longer cloak the fence, only tangled webs remain. The crow or cuckoo calls from the jackfruit tree in front of the house, but no one pays attention. The yard was swept just a few days ago. Every afternoon, water was poured at the base of the jhumko vine, and when the crow cawed ominously, someone would throw their hand into the air to shoo it away, saying 'shoo, go away.' Now, no one notices. Sukhlal sits dozing in the sun. Occasionally, he lifts his tear-filled eyes to glance around. He tries to discern if the red flowers atop the distant shimul tree have begun to burn. He tries to feel the heat of the sun on his bare skin, wondering if the sun's intensity has really increased. How long before Phalgun arrives? (Ali, 2016: 33)

In this story, the subaltern characters—Bonowari, Giridhari, Chedilal, Gangamoyi, and Sukhlal—are vividly brought to life. The relationship between subaltern men and women is central. Father Sukhlal and his three sons—Bonowari, Giridhari, and Chedilal—are estranged due to fierce sexual jealousy. When the father asks his daughter-in-law to behave modestly, the sons suspect the father and accuse him of having ill intentions. In this context, the perspective of James C. Scott is noteworthy:

Sexual jealousy in peasant communities can be seen as a form of internalized oppression, where men and women, due to economic constraints, experience frustration that manifests as control or suspicion within intimate relationships. (Scott, 1985: 39)

In the story '**Pushna**', the love of a Sawtal woman is portrayed. Young Jhunia elopes with a man from outside her society, exemplifying sexual freedom in the narrative. Besides, In "Bikolango Pipasha", the protagonist Nuku's passionate drive toward Alekjan, the wife of Shahrally, is vividly depicted. Nuku perceives her as "water spilling forth as the fog rises, and feels a sense of foreboding surrounding the girl's dark body, akin to the wild darkness of the mountains."

In the story '**Dain**', the narrative unfolds regarding the obsessive infatuation of Binodchoron, a craftsman, toward the widow Subala. Binodchoron gets involved in a fierce quarrel in a cloth shop at the market and is severely beaten and bloodied. The tales of Shawkat Ali resonate with a protest against religious exploitation, caste oppression, and class subjugation. The rebellion against religious and class oppression is poignantly expressed in *Unmul Bashona* with 'Rokte O Shishire', as well as in 'Rongini'.

Shawkat Ali's stories bring to life the lower class against the backdrop of rural life in Bangladesh. He is both the creator and chronicler of the transformation of life in the northern regions of Bengal. His narratives depict the people and society of the village, illustrating class conflicts and social transformations. Similarly, the author presents contemporary issues, society, and history through the lens of short stories. Indeed, all short stories encapsulate the diversity of life of their own times, showcasing their unique structural independence and success. Within the limited scope of a short story, a harmonious unity of the entire experience is maintained. The expression of a profound singular sentiment emerges from a cohesive structure devoid of excess. The intricate representations of life's branching tendrils become undesirable here. With sharp vision, insight, and a balanced perspective, the artistic sensibility of the short story crystallizes into a poignant sphere, where the fragmented and shattered world becomes an embodiment of totality. The temporal and value-laden life currents bloom in the imaginative landscape of infinite aspirations.

The fragmented and shattered world expressed in totality is deeply intertwined with reality in Shawkat Ali's stories. This reality is a faithful representation of the inherent social consciousness of the time and place. The existence of the lower class is interwoven with their existential aspirations. Moreover, the continuity of time and society allows specific economic production structures to facilitate the development of populations concerned with existence and organization. The lower class in Shawkat Ali's narratives evolves within the center of a particular economic production framework.

The portrayal of rural society and the lives of the lower class is uniquely characterized by 'Lelihan Shadh'. Stories like 'Ar Ma Kande Na', 'Nabajatak', 'Lelihan Shadh', 'Bhobondhi', and 'Nayan Tara Kothay Re' depict various facets of domination and exploitation imposed by the upper class upon the lower class. In '**Ar Ma Kande Na**' the existential crisis of the impoverished Ramjan, burdened by debts to the moneylender, is illustrated. His mother suffers from illness; her agonized cries become a constant source of worry for Ramjan. The moments of despair in this narrative stand out as a stark representation of the deprived and exploited lower class. While this story captures the excruciating life experiences of the impoverished landless farmer Ramjan Ali, it also portrays the luxurious lifestyle of the moneylender's affluence. During the monsoon season, the landless farmers become unemployed. Ramjan, the son of a landless farmer, has no permanent source of income and is unable to bear the relentless weeping of his hungry, sick mother, even wishing for her death: "You can't die, old woman. Go ahead, die, and then I will find peace" (Ali, 2016: 286). After the death of his father, Ramjan faces a severe financial crisis as the moneylender repossesses his land. He survives by working as a day laborer in the moneylender's fields. When the incessant rains stop his means of livelihood, the moneylender offers no financial assistance. Thus, Ramjan laments the self-centeredness of the moneylender: "There's no consideration for the fact that the rain stops work, and when work stops, the moneylender doesn't pay." (Ali, 2016: 287) The rural lower class, plagued by hunger, poverty, and illness, leads a subhuman existence. Meanwhile, the village's landlords indulge in lavish entertainment, hosting exuberant musical gatherings during the rain. While day laborers are left without work, they flock to the landlords' gatherings. In this story, Ramjan and Lal Mohammad realize the pleasurable life of the moneylender amidst their struggles. The narrative also depicts the unabated sexual escapades of the moneylender and his son: "The father's eyes are on Kalimaddin thief's wife and the son is crazy about the two young throwers Binodlal and Shajamal" (Ali, 2016: 287). On one hand, the cries of the starving common people resonate, while on the other, the landlords revel in their indulgences. During the monsoon, Lal Mohammad proposes to Ramjan to become a thief's accomplice, even designating the site of theft within the moneylender's granary. At the end of the story, the consciousness of rebellion among the impoverished class is also expressed. Their resentment festers in the face of wealth inequality, as Lal Mohammad tells Ramjan: "Look how much grain the landlords have stored. Why doesn't anyone set fire to them during the dry season?" (Ali, 2016: 288). Here, in Ramjan's imagination, the desire for vengeance against the moneylender surfaces: "He envisions the landlord's house burning. The sky turns red. Smoke billows up in spirals. The granaries burn brightly" (Ali, 2016: 289). This illustrates the longing for revenge of the lower class oppressed by the landlords. The starving marginalized individuals thus yearn to set fire to the moneylender's granaries. Though the narrative is framed against the backdrop of the incessant weeping of Ramjan Ali's dying mother, it ultimately gives voice to the poverty, exploitation, and silent anguish of men and women who touch the soil. In the rural social system, the oppressed farming community gradually becomes incensed against the landlord class. "In particular, the landless farmers continuously engage in conflict to preserve their individual and collective existence. This conflict is against the societal forces governed by the landlord class." (Bose, 2009: 262)

In Shawkat Ali's short story 'Nobojatok', the enduring tale of oppression, deprivation, and exploitation suffered by tenant farmers under the traditional rural usury system is poignantly chronicled. The narrative vividly portrays the inherent antagonism between the moneylenders and the marginalized class of subsistence farmers under their dominion. When the famine-stricken farmers of northern Bengal, ravaged by the scourge of munga, find themselves on the brink of starvation, they are left with no choice but to seek assistance from the moneylenders. Exploiting their desperation, these moneylenders lend rice at exorbitantly high interest rates to the sharecroppers.

Furthermore, during the harvesting season, they manipulate the system to reclaim the borrowed rice at a much lower price, reaping an excessive profit in the process. Within this tale, Montaz Ali, the son of the elderly farmer Hasan Ali, becomes a victim of this exploitative double-dealing. The author deftly exposes the intricate mechanisms of exploitation that entrap tenant farmers in an unyielding cycle of servitude. The rice cultivated on the moneylender's land, which is borne of the tenant's labor and funded by the loaned grain, ultimately finds its way back into the moneylender's granaries as repayment.

It is worth noting that after threshing the harvested rice on the farmstead, the tenant Montaz waits expectantly for his rightful share, as per the customary agreement that mandates half of the yield to be allotted to the landowner and the other half to the tenant. In this manner, Shawkat Ali masterfully illustrates the systemic exploitation and injustice of rural life with profound emotional depth and literary elegance. However, the repayment of the previously borrowed rice, along with its accrued interest, must be fulfilled first, only after which the tenant farmer's rightful share of the harvest will be distributed:

He is deeply afraid of that long ledger bound in red cloth. The rows of tiny black figures have always seemed confusing to him. No one could ever make sense of the calculations the moneylender's son would present. Montaz tells himself that the paddy will be threshed, but when it's time to return home, not even a single sack will be fully his. (Ali, 2016: 52)

The history of the Tebhaga movement repeatedly emerges in Shawkat Ali's fiction as a timeless symbol of struggle. This bloody chapter of history forms the cornerstone of the awakening of the landless sharecropper class. During British rule, the oppressed and exploited farmers of Bengal organized a powerful movement against landlords, jotedars, and the government, which came to be known as the Tebhaga movement. It began in 1946 in the Dinajpur district. The slogan of the Tebhaga activists was: "We demand two-thirds, not half; the plow belongs to the one who tills the land." Fundamentally, their demand was for two-thirds of the harvested crops. Shawkat Ali, with deep sincerity, has intricately portrayed the exploitation rooted in land-based livelihoods and the struggle for survival in his stories.

In Shoukat Ali's 'Nobojatok', one can draw parallels to Abu Ishaq's 'Jok', where the theme of farmers' exploitation by the Mahajan is similarly depicted. However, unlike 'Nobojatok', the story 'Jok' illustrates how the sharecroppers awaken to collective strength, a vital element absent in 'Nobojatok'. The historical Tebhaga movement had instilled a sense of defiance and solidarity within the peasant community, shaking the foundations of the mohajon, and landlord classes. Through this narrative, Shawkat Ali anticipates the resurgence and collective resistance of the oppressed classes. As a critic aptly observes:

The narrative of 'Nobojatok' unfolds against the timeless backdrop of land-based feudal exploitation. Through the birth of a calf, it reflects the rise of the laboring populace against the hostile forces of society. The story mirrors the enduring narrative of the landless sharecroppers, Hasan Ali and his son

Montaz, encapsulating the agonies of poverty and landlessness that resonate with the timeless sufferings of all working men and women at the grassroots level. (Bose, 2015: 147-148)

In '**Bhobonodi**', the duplicitous relationship between the cunning Haji Mohajon and the impoverished farmer is depicted, revealing the self-serving nature of other Mohajon characters, their avarice for property, and diverse behaviors of exploitation and oppression. An illustrative segment of Haji Mohajon's interaction with the helpless peasant Umor-ali reads:

Haji Mohajon, however, proves to be completely devoid of sympathy. He extends a small piece of paper inscribed with a holy prayer towards Umor-ali, saying, 'Here, take this prayer, may it help you, and may Allah be called upon.' After a brief pause, he continues, 'Your esteemed Mohajon may come; I will let him know, and may get some money'. (Ali, 2016: 293)

In this manner, the Mohajon's behavior reflects stark inequity. The pleas of Umor-ali to save his child or Nasiruddin's yearning for seed rice fail to touch the heart of the Haji. The eyes of the distressed Nasiruddin, a poor farmer, reflect images of despair and suffering. The author effectively portrays their family's plight: "His daughter is frail and sickly; his wife's emaciated chest cannot produce milk, her breasts resemble dry jackfruit leaves. In the cow's hoof, worms writhe endlessly—phenyl is unavailable in the market. The two shaky pillars of his house threaten to collapse at any moment." (Ali, 2016: 295)

After receiving no assistance from the Mohajon's household, Nasiruddin reaches the riverbank to find Haji Mohajon's eldest son returning to the village with his family from the city. In stark contrast to his own family's dismal situation, the splendor of the Mohajon household ignites a burning jealousy within him. During this time, a boat carrying the wealthier Mohajons from the city capsizes due to the current while crossing the river on Dibodas's boat. The boatman's assistant, Subolchandra, swims over and hands one end of the rope to Nasiruddin on the shore. Yet, jealousy surges within Nasiruddin, and he feigns indifference. When he releases the rope from his hands, the boat sinks in the middle of the river. In this regard, the researcher's commentary is noteworthy:

This multitude of fragmented images of poverty pushes Nasiruddin further into a realization of life's futility, and this paralyzing awareness of transience renders him indifferent. Consequently, the boat of the wealthy Mahajan sinks forever in the river's whirlpool, and thus, the ravenous greed and dominance of the vested interests are consumed by the flames of vengeance (Bose, 2015: 152).

In this manner, Shawkat Ali's narratives depict the struggles of impoverished farmers for survival. While their stance against the landlord class may be perceived as ultimately ineffective, it encapsulates the comprehensive identity of the 'proletariat' within the social reality. The history of the lower class's daily struggle is significant. The reality of a farmer's everyday life revolves around procuring sustenance for his family and himself. However, the farmer is also conscious of his dignity and self-respect. For this reason, he is prepared to fight. The struggle for self-identity is intrinsically linked to land. The experience of subjugation sparks a consciousness within him. A collective awareness of group identity, ethnic affiliation, regionality, and kinship cultivates a sense of class solidarity. As the oppressed, they unite with one another—as farmers, as lowly beings, as members of the lower class. Consequently, the consciousness of existence among the lower class emerges, invigorated by the process of unified resistance against oppression and exploitation. The lives of the downtrodden, consistently subjected to humiliation and abuse by the upper class, cannot be perpetually devoid of remedy or protest. While the genteel society may struggle to accept their impudence or defiance, they are not extinguished. In silence, their tears occasionally rise to the surface as expressions of protest; their

resistance manifests even through obstinacy. In this context, it is pertinent to discuss James Scott's concept regarding the lower class's protests. Scott extensively analyzes the 'everyday' forms of resistance displayed by the lower class, particularly the farmers. According to Scott,

Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. Elites maintain their rule not only through force but by manufacturing a symbolic order that persuades the subordinate classes to accept their domination as just. (Scott, 1990: 70).

Scott elaborated on the matter further, "The control of material resources and cultural capital allows the elite to define the terms of the struggle, relegating subordinate classes to reactive positions." (Scott, 1985: 46)

In this regard, the common forms of resistance encompass theft of crops, insubordination, pretense, trampling, chatting during work hours, feigning ignorance, telling lies or giving false consent, slander, boycotts, strikes, arson, and engaging in subversive activities. Shaukat Ali's short stories are replete with evidence of such activities from the lower class.

The narrative '**Dui Gajuya**' paints a poignant picture of the exploitation and inhumanity faced by the rural working-class day laborers at the hands of the Mahajan. Pohatu Sheikh and his nephew Rahimuddin sustain their livelihoods by working at the Mahajan's household, yet the Mohajon shows extreme reluctance in providing them their rightful wages. Despite having granaries brimming with rice, the Mohajon fails to extend any assistance to the needy during the crisis of the rainy season. Ironically, it is these very field laborers who toil tirelessly, enduring the scorching sun and soaking rain, to bring the harvest to the Mohajon's granary. Among the impoverished, those who mortgage their land receive loans from the Mohajon, leaving many, like Monohar, to flee the village in despair upon being unable to repay their debts. Through the prism of David Harvey's insightful theoretical framework, "Neoliberalism, through its market-driven policies, systematically strips away the rights and privileges of the working class, rendering them powerless in the face of corporate interests." (Harvey, 2005: 102)

Meanwhile, the helpless Pohatu Sheikh and his nephew Rahimuddin remain bound to the Mohajon, performing all his chores as bonded laborers. At the culmination of the story, it is discernible that:

The seedlings of the new Aus rice field have sprouted and turned green. The hungry cows also joyfully step into the lush green field. Meanwhile, two foolish men sit comfortably side by side on the slope of the road. The day is coming to an end—the darkness is almost here—and a few drops of rain are still falling, with clouds in the sky. It seems that another downpour will come tonight. However, Rahimuddin hasn't forgotten the question. He asks again, "Okay, uncle, tell me, why is the moneylender so angry with me? (Ali, 2016: 106-107)

One day, amidst a fierce storm, they neglect their duty of weeding in the fields. On such a day, the two indulge in a bit of leisure, forgetting even to tend to the farm animals, leading to the suffering of the hungry cattle caught in the rain. Enraged, the Mohajon does not hesitate to unleash physical abuse upon them. Like a ferocious beast, he pounces on them, and despite enduring his cruelty, the two remain under his servitude. However, deep within, their spirit of resistance begins to awaken against the Mohajon's relentless oppression. In a subtle act of retribution, they turn the Mohajon's paddy field into fodder for their cows. Through the lens of Ranajit Guha's critical theoretical perspective, "The deprivation of the working class is not just material but

also psychological, as they are often denied the recognition of their labor, contributing to their invisibility within the social order.” (Guha, 1983: 67)

Shawkat Ali’s **‘Dakini’** similarly illustrates the theme of female vengeance. Driven by hunger, people flee the countryside in droves toward the city, one of whom is a housewife from the banks of the Tista River. Yet upon arriving in the city, they find no assistance whatsoever. Those afflicted by famine roam the streets of the city, desperately searching for food. Seizing the opportunity presented by the drought, a certain class of landlords and Mohajons in the city exploit the situation, engaging with hungry, desperate young women for monetary gain. Amidst clashes between the hungry crowds and the police, this woman from the village, injured in the fray, takes refuge in the hotel owned by the Mohajon, Nekbor Mia.

While she is staying at the hotel, the woman becomes the target of the hotel owner's lust. Awakening in the middle of the night, she confronts this savage beast. Summoning all her strength, she fights back against Nekbor Mia, fiercely determined to free herself from his grasp. With every ounce of her will, she rises to defend her honor. In a furious struggle, she strikes the drunken, deranged Mohajon, successfully preserving her dignity. Emerging from the Mohajon's primal and savage desires, her body is stained with fresh blood, the result of a fierce struggle. This courageous woman transforms into a fiery figure, entirely overpowering the Mohajon : “The girl from the banks of the Tista has sunk her teeth into the beast’s throat, shaking it side to side with a fierce determination to tear away flesh. The beast begins to scream in terror, “Let go, it hurts! Oh, I’m dying—save me!” (Ali, 2016: 123)

The hotel's cook and staff, hearing the commotion, break down the door to rescue the Mohajon. Despite sheltering the helpless woman, the Mohajon is unable to restrain his own lust. Consequently, the destitute woman rises in defiance, fully embodying her resistance. Angela Davis' statement holds significant relevance in this context:

The conditions of proletarian women are not only shaped by class, but are compounded by racism and sexism, creating a unique form of oppression that requires a revolutionary struggle on multiple fronts. (Davis, 1983: 134)

The story **‘Noyontara Kothay Re’** is centered around rural life, drawing from the agricultural economy and social structures of North Bengal. It highlights the poverty and backwardness of rural society, from which Shawkat Ali has collected the ingredients for his narratives. In this regard, the author acknowledges the significance of the lower-class individuals within his own village society. “The subaltern's resistance often remains invisible because it does not conform to the dominant paradigms of rebellion or speech.” (Spivak, 1988: 25). Consequently, the majority of his works are imbued with the internal conflicts and struggles of this society, portraying the lives of its men and women filled with both joy and sorrow. Drawing from his reservoir of experiences, he has harvested the essence of storytelling. In the author's discourse:

The small landlord watches them but orders the driver to move forward, intending to ignore the crowd. As a result, the gathering seems to grow smaller. However, it is not just Monohar Barman anymore; a few others now stand blocking the way. The small landlord cannot comprehend what these people want. Why this collective obstruction? Why this stern silence? A little while ago, he had heard complaints and cries of despair in Monohar Barman’s voice. But now, there is none of that. He begins to feel that these people have come seeking redress from him. Strangely, due to their silent stance, he starts perceiving them as helpless and himself as a king. Why he felt this way is another mystery

altogether. (Ali, 2016: 27)

He has observed the customs and practices of farmers and indigenous communities, while also becoming acquainted with the poverty of the people, their suffering during pandemics, and their helplessness, along with various expressions of gratitude. The incidents and characters derived from his familiar world are both realistic and invigorating. In this context, George Orwell's statement holds particular significance, "The working class will never revolt, not while they can express their hatred by spitting on the floor or kicking the cat." (Orwell, 1937: 94)

In the story 'Achena', the resentment of the impoverished laborer Kismat Ali is vividly depicted at the outset as he witnesses the vast wealth and opulent lifestyle of the landlord Chowdhury family. Kismat survives by selling his labor at the landlord's estate. The selfishness of the landlords engenders hatred within him, as they do not pay the laborers their rightful wages but instead exploit their labor for their own benefit. Consequently, in his frustration, Kismat internally curses the landlord:

He curses silently to himself, thinking, 'If I ask him for even a handful of rice on loan, he won't give it, but he keeps calling me endlessly. Scoundrel! Just wait till tomorrow—I swear, if I don't spit in his face, I'm not my father's son!' (Ali, 2016: 162)

In 'Achena', the insatiable greed of the landlord is laid bare. They engage in a fierce competition to seize the homes and lands of debt-ridden farmers. James C. Scott elaborates on the relentless struggle for survival and the indomitable resilience exhibited by landless peasants in their fight for existence—

The peasant is motivated above all by the need to survive. His resistance to the landlord or the state is shaped not by greed but by the sheer necessity of preserving his livelihood and dignity in the face of exploitation. (Scott, 1976: 5)

In the rural life of North Bengal, famine or drought was once a constant companion. During such times, the fertile lands and homesteads of the impoverished would fall into the hands of the Mohajons. On one hand, their wealth increases; on the other, the lower class becomes destitute. Much like a sociologist, the author elucidates the sources of the Mohajons opulence in 'Achenna' :

Famine strikes every now and then, and somehow, you scoundrels end up with more land. Is it the famine that increases the moneylender's land, or does the famine occur to increase the moneylender's land? This is a baffling question for him. His suspicion is that the famine happens precisely to increase the moneylender's land. (Ali, 2016: 165)

While attempting to steal from the Chowdhury house, Kismat learns that the Chowdhury family desires to usurp his land. He realizes that the rice produced through his labor is not even offered to him as assistance. In this regard, Brecht's observation becomes highly relevant: "The downtrodden farmer is left with no choice but to resist through resilience. The earth he tills may not be his, but the hope it nourishes belongs entirely to him." (Brecht, 1943: 95)

This leads him to resort to theft under the cover of night, rationalizing his criminal act: "I cultivated the land, I harvested the crop; if I take that crop, why should I be considered a thief?" (Ali, 2016: 163) Ultimately, after the untimely death of his wife due to lack of medical care, Kismat, in despair over feeding his hungry children, resorts to stealing rice and proudly exits the Mahajan's courtyard with a sack on his back. During this moment, house servants Joygun and Shukur spot him, but when questioned by the Mahajan, they deny seeing anything: "How can one recognize a person in the darkness?" Kismat, Joygun, and Shukur belong to the same class of

exploited lower-class individuals. They unite against the selfishness of the landlords. The storyteller clearly

delineates the conflict between two classes here. “The story ‘Achena’ is about the struggle for survival of a marginalized landless farmer and his indomitable fight for life. It is set against the eternal backdrop of the rural and the Mahajan's relentless conflict with sharecroppers” (Bose, 2009: 158).

In the narrative of the storyteller, the transformation of rural society amidst the economic upheavals of Pakistan and subsequently independent Bangladesh is vividly depicted, particularly in relation to the infiltration of industries and factories into rural life. The struggles for existence and survival among collective communities are intricately woven into a tapestry of emotional experiences that emerge as central themes in his stories. The author emphasizes the socio-economic and class conflicts inherent within communal societies, while also taking into account the socio-economic political contexts that shape the valuation of individuals as representatives of their respective classes.

Through the lens of rural life, the author scrutinizes the beliefs, customs, and humanity of indigenous or tribal communities, while simultaneously unveiling the underlying truths of social crime prevalent among marginalized populations. The narratives portray the nomadic existence of the lower classes, crushed under the weight of poverty and superstition, alongside the simultaneous existence of diverse religious practices. The stark contrast between the primal, instinctual life of the oppressed and the hollow existence of the upper classes is rendered unambiguous and irrefutable in his storytelling.

The themes of exploitation, deprivation, and existential crises faced by the lower classes are poignantly articulated in stories such as ‘Achena’, ‘Soja Rasta’, ‘Andhokarer Gaan’, ‘Dui Gojua’, ‘Bidae De Ma’, and ‘Shuno he Lakhinder’. Each of these narratives serves to amplify the voices of resistance and defiance among the marginalized, while the author delves deep into the root causes of social inequity that pervade rural life.

The voices of the proletariat resonate in numerous tales, where they confront the collusive exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, landowners, and feudal lords. At times solitary, and at others collectively, they challenge the centers of power held by the elite. In ‘**Andhokarer Gaan**’, the protests of Kosimuddin and Nurbanu against the cruelty of the moneylender are articulated. Kosimuddin's ancestors, his father and grandfather, had spent their lives in perpetual servitude to the oppressive landlord, Mandal, their existence bound by the unyielding chains of hereditary obligation. In the eloquence of the storyteller's voice:

Kasimuddin is overwhelmed by a profound sense of helplessness—a suffocating awareness that there is nothing a man can do. How could one resist? Your single hand is no match for the ten hands of the moneylender. Your pair of eyes are powerless against his thousand watchful ones. Where could you flee, beyond his all-seeing gaze? With his head bowed low, he stands motionless. But Nurbanu's face refuses to bend. Her head rises, resolute and unyielding. Her body straightens with the tautness of a drawn bowstring, radiating defiance. From her throat emerge faint, fragmented words, like the primeval murmurings of an ancient woman. Pausing deliberately, she utters, “The moneylender's servant bites into me—devours me, piece by piece. Then, his son takes his turn, and finally, the moneylender himself consumes what remains.” (Ali, 2016: 125)

However, Kosimuddin, rejecting this legacy of subjugation, resolved to break free from the shackles of bondage and aspired to build a life of unrestrained liberty, filled with matrimonial bliss alongside his beloved wife. Yet, this vision of emancipation was shattered when Mohajan, the lecherous village chieftain, cast his predatory gaze upon Kosimuddin's beautiful wife, Nurbanu.

Driven by his insatiable lust and wielding the formidable weapon of his wealth, landlord orchestrated a sinister conspiracy, accusing Kosimuddin of theft in a fabricated case. Consequently, Kosimuddin was unjustly imprisoned, leaving Nurbanu vulnerable to the predatory schemes of the landlord. In his absence, Nurbanu was first handed over to Lal Mia, Mohajon's trusted servant, and later forced into servitude as a concubine in Mohajon's decadent pleasure house. There, her dignity was obliterated; adorned in resplendent garments and lavish ornaments, she endured an existence marred by relentless humiliation and unceasing torment.

After three agonizing years of incarceration, Kosimuddin returned to his village, driven by an indomitable determination to reclaim his wife. Yet, despite confronting the despotic Mohajon, he found himself powerless against the landlord's overwhelming influence and failed to liberate Nurbanu from her captivity. Facing the threat of expulsion from the village, Kosimuddin sought a clandestine meeting with his wife under the cover of night. With a heart brimming with desperation, he pleaded with her to flee with him to the city, where they might escape the clutches of Mohajon's unyielding tyranny. However, burdened by the inescapable specter of Mohajon's reach, Nurbanu, resigned to her fate, declined his heartfelt entreaties, leaving Kosimuddin to grapple with the irreparable loss of his dreams and his beloved. Ranajit Guha reflects on the resistance power born out of the helplessness of the oppressed subaltern classes— "Subalternity is marked by a condition of deep exploitation and helplessness. Yet, this helplessness does not imply passivity—it is often the seedbed of rebellion." (Guha, 1997: 23)

'**Bidae de Ma**', presents the narrative of Jolekha avenging the past deeds of her husband, illustrating the complexities of human relationships in the face of adversity. During the famine following a flood, Jolekha endures humiliation at the hands of the moneylender, who later marries her after the demise of her husband. Her thoughts, steeped in the historical context of her deprivation, underscore the emotional turmoil she experiences in the struggle for survival. At the narrative's culmination, it is apparent that—

Amidst the echoing call reverberating through the vast expanse, she floats on her back, swimming across the current. The desperate cries of a person in distress, the frantic splashes of their arms against the water—none of it reaches her ears. (Ali, 2016: 79)

The exploitation and deprivation of the indigenous Santhal community find poignant expression in the titular story '**Shuno he Lakhinder**', which draws upon the narratives of Mansamangals and the folklore of Behula-Lakhinder. In this tale, the Sawtal character Gupinath embodies the suffering of the lower strata of society, while the cunning moneylender Lakshmikanta represents the privileged class, demonstrating the power dynamics at play. The impoverished Sawtal community is portrayed as being harassed and oppressed by Lakshmikanta, unable to unseat his entrenched power. When Gupinath identifies himself as the son of Bishohari, the nature of his class position and suffering becomes increasingly evident. He states, "We are the children of Bishohari, who, like our mother, bears the world's sins and suffering within, burning from within. We too bear the poison and burn." (Ali, 2016: 96)

In many of Shawkat Ali's novels, leftist political ideologies are intricately interwoven into character dialogues, with class struggle and consciousness documented in works such as 'Dakshinayon-er Din' (1985), 'Kulae Kalasrot' (1986), and 'Purboratri Purbodin'(1986). This thematic engagement extends to his short stories as well. The class consciousness manifested in the dialogues of Gupinath reflects, "This is not a clash between mortals and gods, sir. It is the irreconcilable rift between the impoverished and the wealthy. Just as I am the progeny of a venomous serpent, I possess no home, no dwelling, no land, no inheritance." (Ali, 2016: 98)

In **'Punorbar Beyonet'**, during the early stages of the war, the brutal murder of an entire family by the Pakistanis propels a youth into becoming a freedom fighter. This character, having witnessed the massacre, manages to rescue his comrades from a Pakistani camp and exact revenge, illustrating the interplay of personal loss and the collective struggle. Shawkat Ali emerges as a transformative figure, rendering the essence of humanity and life through his characters, who, while not historically grandiose, embody the voice of the impoverished rural populace, thriving within the temporal truths of history. Page | 87

His focus on the grim realities of life differentiates him, as he consciously steers clear of conventional paths. Instead, he breaks through established norms, expanding his narrative scope within the confines of character. Notably, he frequently incorporates Sanskrit words to enrich the narrative texture when the story demands.

The backdrop of **'Lelihan Shadh'** narrates the resistance of the lower classes against the oppressive forces of the moneylenders. The story vividly portrays the rebellious spirit of marginalized laborers like Monohor Barman and Sabdar Ali, who suffer under the tyranny of their exploitative landlord. Engaged in all aspects of agricultural labor, from sowing to harvesting, they are traditionally entitled to one-sixteenth of the total rice produced. However, the avaricious moneylender fails to pay even this meager wage adequately. In **'Lelihan Shadh'**, the greedy, selfish, and cruel nature of Salam Chowdhury, the moneylender, is unveiled. These moneylenders exploit day laborers through any means necessary, depriving them of their rightful earnings. Despite established rules governing production and distribution, the moneylender disregards them with impunity. The author skillfully encapsulates the characteristics of the feudal class, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

He spends the night with Kasimali's wife, and now he is seeking a way to bring Rahimuddin's widowed daughter into his bed. Meanwhile, before anyone notices, he has snatched Mahindar's land, gripping it firmly in his hands. He has everything, yet look—more keeps flowing in effortlessly. But he refuses to give me anything. It's not charity I ask for, but the price of hard work, and still, he will not pay that. (Ali, 2016: 14)

Through these vivid depictions, Shawkat Ali poignantly illuminates the struggles of the lower class against the oppressive structures of society, making a profound statement about social justice and human dignity.

In the social structure of the Indian subcontinent, there has been a distinction in the stratification of society since prehistoric times. However, the most significant factor in this social structure has been the economic criteria. Globally, there is a prevailing social, political, and economic instability and inequality. It is from this inequality that various forms of social divisions have emerged. These divisions have taken on different forms and intensities. In society, a certain class of people controls the economic and power structures, exerting dominance over others. They have imposed authority on other people, enforcing exploitative policies. As a result, the powerless and marginalized groups in society have been exploited. Along their life's path, they have been defeated and compelled to accept subjugation. However, it is not that they have always accepted it without resistance. At some point in their lives, they have protested, rebelled, opposed, and even revolted. It is from such profound reflections that the theory of the 'Subaltern' has gained global recognition. This modern theory has opened up many opportunities for literary discussions. Within literature, particularly in the realm of fiction, the exploration of this theory is crucial for the progress of our society, the development of the state, and the creation of a balanced and just society.

Shawkat Ali has demonstrated unparalleled skill in depicting the lives of the lower class in Bengali literature. He has cast a compassionate gaze upon the oppressed, persecuted, and neglected people of society. Through a multi-layered, thoughtful perspective, he has constructed the entire experience and emotions of those whom the theorists of the lower class label as such, portraying them vividly in his stories. Shawkat Ali presents the socio-economic and political realities of the lower class along with their spirit of resistance, weaving it into a robust narrative. Against the backdrop of exploitation and oppression by the upper class, he portrays the inner humanity of the lower class characters—people who not only endure suffering but are also capable of striking back.

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