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Gentle Violence

Bengali Middle Class Women Living under Patriarchy in Bani Basu's Novels

ABSTRACT: The article examines narratives on domestic violence in middle-class families in selected novels of an acclaimed Indian author, Bani Basu, who writes in Bengali. *Svetpātharer thālā* (1990) and *Khārāp chele* (2002), set in the second half of the 20th century in Kolkata, provide meticulous depictions of the patriarchal system in an urban middle-class society that is modern and conservative at the same time. The analysis suggests that Basu follows relatively conventional narrative patterns while portraying women experiencing domestic violence, namely showing their journey from submissive wives—psychologically manipulated by their husbands, their in-laws and the society at large—to self-confident agents of change who fight for their freedom and happiness, paying a heavy price for their acts of rebellion.

KEYWORDS: Bengali literature, Bani Basu, Indian middle-class, patriarchy, domestic violence, psychological violence, feminism

Middle-class women in India but also elsewhere are often socialised to perceive the outside world as a threat to their safety: if they are at risk of violence, it could happen in the street, perpetrated by low-class strangers, not at home. Meanwhile, women of all social strata

may experience domestic violence and research shows that there is no clear pattern for the risk of violence being linked to a specific level of income (Johnson et al. 2008: 93). Studies conducted in India point towards higher risk of domestic violence among the poor yet emphasise the prevalence of various forms of abuse across the whole social spectrum (Mahapatro 2018: 22). What makes the situation of middle-class women different is that they might be surprised or even shocked when violence or abuse happens to them. They may also feel a strong need to hide it to maintain the image of an ideal family in front of their neighbours or relatives (Kashyap et al. 2014: 69). In these cases, perpetrators of violence are often not stereotypical monsters, but educated, cultured men who use nonphysical means, such as manipulation or humiliation as forms of violence to harm or control women of their household.

This article aims at analysing the depiction of domestic violence in middle-class family setting in the novels of Bani Basu. Basu (b. 1939) is one of the leading figures in Indian literature written in the Bengali language, a recipient of Sahitya Academy Award in 2010. During the four decades of her literary career, she has become famous for portraying Kolkata's middle class. Two novels were selected for scrutiny in this article: *Svetpātharer thālā* ("The Plate of White Marble") and *Khārāp chele* ("Evil son"), published in 1990 and 2002 respectively. The first book gained huge popularity among Bengali-speaking audience, especially after its film adaptation was released in 1992, starring the famous actress, Aparna Sen, in the leading role.

Psychological and economic abuse in domestic setting

Domestic violence is a problem in most societies in the world for, as Meerambika Mahapatro points out, "it is a manifestation of the patriarchal society aiming at perpetuation of unequal power sharing and relationships" (Mahapatro 2018: 2). Being a systemic problem, domestic violence should not be viewed as a series of random, accidental acts of violence amounting to nothing more than incidents, for typically

recuring episodes of physical violence form a part of generally abusive behaviour: the perpetrator frequently aims at creating an environment, in which the victim lives in a state of fear and isolation and therefore can be easily controlled or manipulated (ibid.:1–2).

Psychological and economic abuse are generally perceived as the least severe forms of violence (Maiuro 2015: v). The prevalence of psychological violence in India is hard to estimate, and the estimates of various agencies and institutions provide figures that vary from 16 to 43 percent, with abuse related to dowry being the most common (Mahapatro 2018: 36). The reason for such a considerable disparity, as well as the relatively low level of abuse reported, might be the social perception of psychological violence as a natural part of life. As Mahapatro explains, due to their subordinate position in the family, women usually "do not understand nature and the depth of the problem, and consider it normal and therefore not categorizing it under psychological violence" (ibid.: 36).

Psychological violence, sometimes called emotional abuse, takes various forms and can be country specific—in various cultures different behaviours can be classified as abuse (Johnson et al. 2008: 109). The most universal forms of psychological violence are behavioural control, neglect, deprivation, lack of emotional bonding and support, criticism, isolation, humiliation, denial of basic minimum personal needs, non-involvement in decision-making, restriction in mobility, use of abusive language, verbal abuse and threats, shouting and forcing a person to do trivial tasks (O'Leary 2015: 33). Domestic psychological violence is criminalised in India under The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and apart from universal forms of abuse, it also highlights one culturally specific abusive behaviour: "insults or ridicule, especially with regard to not having a child or a male child" (Section 3.III).

Forms of economic violence can be divided into three categories: sabotage, control, and exploitation. The first two are the most common, especially in the Indian context. Economic sabotage usually manifests itself in not allowing a woman to work outside the house or study, which gives the husband or his family full control of her life.

Financial control occurs when the husband or family take money or resources from the woman, leaving her without financial means to meet her personal needs, control her access to money, restrict her from decision making, or deprive her of information about financial decisions or economic situation of the family. The third category of abusive behaviour is financial exploitation, for example, forcing the victim to take a loan or to make other financial decisions without her will (Anitha 2019: 1855–1856). The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, criminalises economic abuse under Section 3.IV. It lists various forms of financial control and does not mention certain categories of economically abusive behaviour, but the list is open. The legislation as such prohibits "any act, omission or commission or conduct" that "injures or causes harm, whether physical or mental, to the aggrieved person."

According to India's National Family Health Survey (2019–21), almost 32 percent of Indian women aged 15–49 experience some form of domestic violence (usually multiple forms) and the analysis of the data suggests that women with higher education and families with higher income have lower levels of domestic violence. At the same time women who are windowed or divorced are at a higher risk of violence compared to married women (Ramasubramani et al. 2023: e1, e6). There are no detailed studies on domestic violence among middle-class families in the state of West Bengal. However, a recent study of domestic violence cases that were reported in the region under The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, sheds some light on the situation of victims. Very high percentage of them reported psychological and economic abuse. Among the most common forms were ill-treatment, such as ridiculing and defaming, as well as various instances of economic violence, such as preventing the victim from knowing about or having access to family income (Dhawan and Bhasin 2024: 4, 6). The study also raised the question of the reasons for not reporting abuse. Interviewed natal family members of women who experienced violence mainly pointed to the fear of divorce and losing financial support. Some also mentioned the risk of the increase in violence after reporting and embarrassment about seeking help (ibid.: 8).

Depiction of domestic violence in literary fiction

Stories of violence against women and domestic violence have been present in various literary genres for centuries, even if the issue was not defined in the way it is today. As Janice Haaken points out, this led to the development of certain conventional narratives and tropes in storytelling, both fictional and nonfictional (Haaken 2010: 79). Some of these narratives are a part of the patriarchal culture, such as the depiction of the idealised oppressed (innocent maiden) tortured by the cruel villain, but also the idealization of the masculine protector who helps the oppressed woman (ibid.: 79–80).

With the advent of emancipatory movements, new storytelling conventions emerged and Haaken groups modern literary narratives describing domestic violence into three categories: *the story of bondage* which "centers on the female protagonist's awaking knowledge of the household as a site of danger". In this narrative, the household is generally depicted as claustrophobic and marriage as "a deathly embrace" (ibid.: 87). In the second category, *stories of deliverance*, there are narratives focusing on resistance and escape of the abused woman from the oppressor (ibid.: 88). The third convention according to Haaken is *the story of struggle and reparation*, so a narrative that shows the situation post violence, which may include tales of strength, defiance but also loneliness of the former oppressed (ibid.: 93).

Haaken also draws attention to the phenomenon of women who suffer from violence but are also themselves abusers. This includes women who transfer cruelty to other women and help maintain the patriarchal system, as well as stories of women who experience domestic abuse and in the same narrative are abusive towards people of different classes or ethnicities, such as servants (ibid.: 82). It was only recently, in the 1980s, that the feminist movement started to shift its focus towards the issue of solidarity among women of all generations, classes, and ethnic backgrounds. Haaken notices the subsequent change in the narrative on domestic abuse, which acquires an additional message: violence against women is not the problem to be fought alone (ibid.: 92).

Although Haaken's research material consists of narratives in English, it is worth noting that stories that follow similar conventional plotlines can also be found in Indian or, more specifically, Bengali literature, including works written before Bani Basu's novels examined in this article. Probably one that deserves special mention is Mahasveta Devi's acclaimed novel *Hājār curāśir Mā* ("Mother of 1084"), published originally in Bengali in 1974 and then translated into Hindi and English. It tells the story of a middle-class family: a mother of adult children whose youngest son is killed in the police operation against the Naxalite movement. In the confinement of her house, she reflects on her relationship with her dead rebel son, her husband and the rest of the society, and realises that she has been living in an oppressive system (Subramanian 2013: 140–150). The narrative definitely falls under Haaken's category of *the story of bondage*, and towards the end—*the story of deliverance*.

Depiction of domestic violence in Bani Basu's novels

One of the novels examined here, *Svetpātharer thālā*, tells the story of Bandana who grew up in a free and friendly environment, brought up by her father and uncle. She was excited to enter a new household after marriage and although she had much less freedom than before, she quickly found her place in the new family:

> She had never had to worry about money or give any opinion. Her husband had never discussed finances with her, or what he planned to do with his money. She would just fit, as it were, into the already demarcated pattern of a beautifully laid out joint family as one more pawn on the chess board. For her no rules had to be changed, no arrangements had to be altered, only instead of nine members, the household now had ten. She had accepted all just as themselves. (Basu 2018: 41)[1]

[1] *ṭākākaṛir biṣaẏe konadin bhābte haẏni, kono matāmat dite haẏni. abhimanyu konadin tār saṅge ālocanā kareni tār ṭākā niẏe se ki karbe. ekṭā sājāno yautha paribārer caukhupi kāṭā chake se yena ekṭā ghũṭir mato ese base giẏechila. tār*

Jina, the protagonist of the second novel, *Khārāp chele*, also looks forward to joining the new household after marriage:

> Jina thought that marriage meant freedom. Marriage meant that you became a true lady. Sindoor on a forehead and all prospective candidates realized that this case is closed, looking at this direction would be the waste of time. And secondly, marriage meant being a housewife, kind of a manager: taking decisions, expressing opinions, doing things according to your knowledge. (Basu 2016: 30)[2]

But marriage can also create anxiety if a woman is marrying against her will or into a family that is much different than her own. This is the case of the third female protagonist whose story will be discussed in this article—Mallika, Jina's sister-in-law. She grew up in her uncle's house in the countryside and the family treated her as a burden, so her marriage was arranged quickly, without her consent. The painful memory haunts her:

> What about her opinion? It was this really that brought the tears of humiliation. Unbelievable, even after so many years, when her older daughter is already eighteen, this dark and shameful evening of uncertainty came back to repeatedly torment her. Bringing the memories of solitude she experienced when she entered the house after her wedding. Two young men, one young woman, an old couple. And the darkness of being unable to tell anyone how uneasy, awkward, and frightened she felt. (Basu 2016: 14–15)[3]

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janya kono niẏam badlābār darkār haẏni, kono byabastā paribartan haẏni, bāṛite na'jan sadasyer jāẏgāẏ daśjan haẏechila ei paryanta. bandanā kothāo etaṭuku bhār haẏni. sakalke se tārā yeman temnibhābe mene niẏechila. English translation: Basu 2020: 65.

[2] *jinār dhāraṇā chila biẏe māne sei mukti. biẏe mānei tumi ekṭā goṭā lady haẏe gele. Tomār māthāẏ sĩndur, sutarāṁ sambhābya sab anākāṅkṣit candidates jānbe e case khatam. e dike ār najar niẏe lābh nei. dvitīẏata, tumi gṛhiṇī. māne kartṛkārak. nije nije siddhānta nebe, nijer matāmat debe, nijer bidyābuddhir opar nirbhar kare calbe ekhan theke.*

[3] *tār ābār matāmat? ei ācchilyai āsale tāke apamāner kānnā kẫdiẏechila. āścarya, ekhano, eta dineo, baṛa meẏe āṭhāro pār hala, ekhano sei andhakār, anirāpad,*

All female characters created by Basu have been socialised to view marriage not only as something inevitable but also an important institution that provides woman with a respectable place in the society. None of them question their position in the new household or see anything abnormal in being financially depended on their husbands, restricted from taking any major decisions regarding their lives or having their mobility controlled.

Stories of Bandana and Jina start with a happy marriage (or at least that is their initial view of it) and then follow the conventional narrative of bondage. In case of the first one, the situation changes dramatically when her husband dies and the family expects her to follow all restrictions traditionally associated with widowhood. Special vegetarian meals are prepared for her but she despises them. Lack of nutritious food makes her weaker day by day. Her in-laws force her to isolate herself from other members of the household as well as from the society. It surprises her at first but then turns to irritation: "If she was not allowed to do even a small job like making tea or serving meals, how was she supposed to spend her time, sitting the whole day like a powerless idol?" (Basu 2018: 47).[4] With the isolation comes negligence that makes her frustration and loneliness grow:

> No one had realised that she might require more than four white saris. Who would care? The one who would have cared had gone. Suddenly Bandana shuddered. If the person who cared were here, she wouldn't have to wear such saris. Two whole almirahs had saris piled on every shelf, many of which she had not even worn. (ibid.: 23–24)[5]

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apamānmaẏ sandhyā tār anubhūtite phire āse. phire āse bibāhottar sei bāṛir dviprāharik nirjanatāo. duṭi yubok ekṭi taruṇī, ek prauṛhā. sei asvati, asvācchandya, asubidher kathā, ātonker kathā kāuke nā balte pārār andhakār.

[4] *sāmānya cā-karā, khābār deoẏā e kājgulo karte nā dile sārā din ṭhũṭo jagannāth haẏe tār samaẏ kāṭbe ki kare?* English translation: Basu 2020: 74.

[5] *kāro kheẏāl haẏni cārṭer beśi ei śāṛi bandanār darkār hate pare. ke kheẏāl rākhbe? kheẏāl karār lok to cale gechhe. haṭhāt śiure uṭhla bandanā. kheẏāl karār lokṭi thākle tāke e jinis parte hata nā. duṭo ālmari bharti thāke-thāke śāri sājāno raẏeche. tār kato parāi haẏni.* English translation: Basu 2020: 37.

Bandana's life becomes even more miserable when she realises she is now also barred from participating in weddings and other religious or family celebrations. She stops going out of the house as her in-laws find it inappropriate but also because at some point she starts to feel that her presence is unwelcomed. Narrator comments: "The world with its society and its homes was a vast turbulent ocean. Amidst this endless desolation she was just a ghost in a solitary cell on a solitary island" (Basu 2018: 43).[6]

Months of isolation and negligence take a toll. At some point, Bandana's younger sister-in-law notices a disturbing change in her appearance and mental state: "The entire family seemed to be gradually forgetting that a living entity, someone called Boumoni, still existed in the household. What she used to be, and what had she been reduced to" (ibid.: 17).[7]

Psychological abuse against other Basu's protagonists, Jina and Mallika, is less severe but nevertheless persistent and destructive. Jina's husband neglects her since the beginning of the marriage while at the same time sabotages her relationship with other members of the household. He frequently comments on her appearance, keeping her in a constant worry that she needs to change and adjust to his preferences. Meanwhile, Jina silently observes her older sister-in-law, Mallika, who might be subject to gaslighting (manipulation aimed at lowering woman's self-confidence and tightening control over her). To Jina's surprise, her father-in-law and husband think of her as absent-minded and not good at managing the household while she seems to do just fine and is busy with bringing up her two daughters:

> Mallika constantly praised Jina's virtues, presenting herself as useless. I forget everything, she'd say. I make a mess of everything. Jina had

[6] *samasta biśva tār samaj-saṁār niẏe ekṭā biśāl srotosvān samudra, mājhkhāne ananta nijanatār madhye ekṭi maunī jalṭungi ghare pretinī ek.* English translation: Basu 2020: 70.

[7] *bāṛiśuddha sabāi yena āste āste bhule yacche baumaṇi bale ekṭā jvaljyāsta mānuṣ ekhāne āche. se ki chila, ār ki haẏechhe!* English translation: Basu 2020: 26.

> impression that something was not right about the way Mallika talked about herself. (Basu 2016: 30)[8]

> Mallika said, If I were to express my opinion, who would listen to me? Who am I? What are my credentials? I studied in a rural college, didn't even get my BA degree, always lived on someone's charity. (…) She always said it in a familiar and reserved way. That she doesn't know anything. Actually, she seemed like a strange, mysterious, shadowy figure. (Basu 2016: 48–49)[9]

Depiction of abusers and enablers of domestic violence

The tragedies of Bani Basu's female protagonists take place in a seemingly peaceful environment, in families with little financial hardships. The author opens *Svetpātharer thālā* with a detailed description of the neighborhood where Bandana has moved after marriage. An impressive spacious residence of her husband's family was one of these buildings in which "first-class materials from British companies—marble, pillars, aches, tiles, original Burma-teak windows, doors, rafters and the lime-stoned-layered, twenty-inch-thick brickwork—continued to ostentatiously preserve the antique glory." (Basu 2018: 5)[10] Jina and Mallika's new household might be less affluent, but the reader is informed right at the beginning of the novel that their father-in-law had held managerial positions before retirement and now his sons have successful careers as well (Basu 2016: 16).

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[8] *jinā gunpanāy tār cokh kapāle uṭhe āche. mallika dhāraṇā tār budhhi bale kichu nei. tāi se sab bhule yāy. elomelo kare phele. jina dekheche buddhi na thākār katha ṭhik nay.*

[9] *mallika balechila, āmi matāmat jāhir karbār mato kare dile ke śunbe se mat? ke āmi? kī āmār paricay? grāmer kaleje paṛechi, biẏe-ṭā kampliṭ kari ni, sab samaẏer kāro nā kāro daẏāẏ bẽcechi. (…) kathā balche pariciti antaraṅga bhaṅgite. gharoẏā bhāṣā. yena kichhuṭi jāne nā. kintu āsale se yena ek āmūl rahasyamaẏī, chāẏābṛtā.*

[10] *biliti kompānir paẏlā nambar jinis—mārbal, thām, khilen, ṭāli, āsal barmā-ṭiker jānlā, darjā, bargā ebaṁ cun-bālir biś uñcir gā̃thani ei sab bāṛi prācīnatvake ekhano sāṛambare rakṣā kare caleche.* English translation: Basu 2020: 1.

Abusers in the novels have one common feature: they are two-faced people. Jina's husband Nikhil, as well as Bandana's parents-in-law, are respected in the society, and take efforts to maintain the image in front of the outside world. They can also be very friendly, or even generous towards people that they eventually harm. Just after marriage Nikhil showers his wife with gifts, compliments her looks and takes her to fancy restaurants. However, he is also possessive and expects total obedience form her, including in their sexual life. Jina fails to understand the duality of his personality: "He belongs to such household, he has had a comfortable life, he is socially polished, everything is perfect. Still inside him lives a cruel and rude man." (Basu 2016: 31).[11]

The other protagonist, Bandana, initially feels blessed with having seemingly loving parents-in law. When she enters her new home, her mother-in-law declares: "She is now my daughter. Not my daughter-in--law. Daughter."[12] Her father in-law "treated her so warmly as one of the family" (Basu 2018: 31).[13] Yet, couple of years later, when she wants to go back to her studies to complete her MA, her mother-in-law objects and as her husband and father-in-law do not want to interfere, Bandana must abandon the idea (ibid.: 47). After her husband's demise, the situation deteriorates quickly. Although the abuse is evident, her parents-in--law try to maintain decorum. When the father-in-law comes to discuss the financial arrangements, he is gently persuading her to accept the proposal to give him full control of his late son's money. It is supposed to be in the best interest of the family to which, as she is reminded, she still belongs (ibid.: 63). Later, in a similar manner Bandana is forced to hand over most of her jewelry to her sister-in-law who is getting married. At the same time her father-in-law acts in front of his friends as a man who must worry about finances and who makes effort to take great care of her son's widow and her son (ibid.: 50–52).

Other members of both households are not the main abusers but hurt the female protagonists in many small ways. Some act carelessly and

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[11] *eman bābār chele, jībane kono kichur abhāb haẏni, bāire pāliś āche, sabi ṭhik. kintu bhetare kothāo ekṭā bhīṣaṇ rūṛh amārjita mānuṣ bās kare.*

[12] *o āmār meẏe hala. bau naẏ. meẏe.*

[13] *kata āpanjaner mato byabahār karen.*

unintentionally cause suffering. Like Bandana's uncle who brought her up after her parents' death. He squandered the money her father left for her, without realizing she might need it after marriage. Some other family members become enablers by not speaking against the abuse or simply accepting it as a social norm. When a teenage cousin in Bandana's household innocently suggests that Bandana could dress more modestly because the elders are concerned, the young girl thoughtlessly takes the abusers' side (ibid.: 28). In the novel *Khārāp chele* Jina's husband, Nikhil, is the main abuser, but other men of the house fail to stop him, although the situation is gradually going from bad to worse. Nikhil's brother refrains from taking any responsibility and is mainly absent, spending his evenings in a club playing cards. Their father, although he "has a profound respect and sympathy for women" (Basu 2016: 19),[14] prefers to avoid confrontations with his sons: "His family has grown by itself. His role was limited to protecting it and that is what he was doing, treating fairly all its members, never enforcing his authority" (ibid.: 22)[15]

Bani Basu's narrative of emancipation

In the novels examined here, *the story of bondage* of the female protagonists is followed by another conventional narrative—*the story of deliverance*. All the women at some point come to the realisation that throughout their lives they have been controlled, unfairly criticised, looked down upon. For Jina, it is a moment when she has her hair cut under her husband's pressure and feels humiliated by it: "But this was too much for me, it was too much, and if you do too much against your will, it makes you suffer" (Basu 2016: 44).[16] She eventually

[14] *meẏeder prati tā̃r agādh śraddhā ebaṁ karuṇā.*

[15] *paribārṭā tā̃r āpanā thekei haẏe uṭhechila. tā̃r bhūmikāṭā chila śudhu rakṣā karār. se bhūmikā tini pālan karechen. sabāike yathāyogye maryādā diẏechen. kono jāẏgātei kaṭhor kartṛtva phalāte yānni.*

[16] *kintu eṭā āmār pakṣe baḍḍa beśi, mane too much haẏe jācche, haẏe gela, eta beśi icchār biruddhe kāj karle ekṭā ulṭo pratikriẏā haẏ.*

takes a part-time job without the knowledge of her husband. Through it, she learns that he has been having an affair for years and has a son while Jina has no children despite wanting to have them. Meanwhile, Mallika is observing her sister-in-law and gains confidence. When the time comes, she is ready to stand up for Jina and for herself: "Mallika thought, I am almost forty years old. Till today, I have never done even the smallest task completely on my own without asking someone's permission. Today, after so many years, I could finally do it" (ibid.: 98–99).[17]

Bandana's story of bondage seems to come to an end when her uncle takes her away from her in-laws' and she starts working as a teacher, managing the house by herself. But being a widow in the Indian society in the 1960s proves challenging. Even if she is surrounded by educated, supposedly progressive people, everyone expects her to follow conservative rules imposed on Hindu widows, and this brings emotional distress:

> Bandana just couldn't speak out and say that she ate everything and no separate arrangements had to be made for her. Having been unable to utter the words, she felt deepest shame within herself. (…) But if she told them, what then would have been their reaction? Hate? Shock? Taunts? Ridicule? Even though she felt ashamed of herself, it appeared she had saved her reputation before others. (Basu 2018: 97)[18]

While women's awaking and liberation from the abusive relationship constitute the breaking point in both novels, none of the protagonists gains peace and happiness by revolting against patriarchal norms. After learning about her husband's affair with a sex-worker, Jina wants

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[17] *mallikār mane hala callišer kāche bayas hala tār. āj abhdhi ekṭā biṣaẏeo nijer buddhite, kāuke jijñes nā kare sāmānyatam kājo kare ni se. āj, etadin pare, ekṭā nā-haẏ karlai.*

[18] *bandanā kichutei mukh phuṭe balte pārla nā se sab khāẏ, tār janya ālādā byabasthā karā darkār nei. kathāṭā nā balte pere bhetare-bhetare kī gabhīr lajjā! (…) tāhale balte pratikriẏā ki hata. ghṛṇā? bismaẏ? bidrūp? ṭiṭkiri? nijer kāche lajjita haleo eder kāche yena tār mānṭā bẽce gela*. English translation: Basu 2020: 154.

to divorce him and adopt his child, yet she finds it difficult to tell her parents and siblings about the plan. Her father-in-law is willing to support her, but she treats his offer as a gesture of charity and dreams of a completely independent existence. Yet, it seems totally unrealistic in a society in which being a part of a certain family and class constitutes such an important marker of identity. Bandana continues feeling aliened even after succeeding in building a new life for herself and her son. She turns down a marriage proposal, fearing the reaction of the society. With time, she realises that freedom means not only fighting with the system that enslaves women but also changing one's own views and values acquired through socialisation in the patriarchal society. Bandana says: "I understand I'm living within a hard shell made of the habit of certain beliefs, learnings and traditions. But to break out of this is very tough" (ibid.: 108–109).[19]

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, Bani Basu in her novels follows well-established narrative conventions in depicting domestic violence. Using the terms introduced by Janice Haaken, Basu's protagonists appear to move through different stages: from the state of bondage, through struggle and liberation, to some form of closure. Although the stories are built on such universal narrative pattern, they remain relevant to Bengali readers, as they portrait the urban Hindu middle-class, meticulously unveiling the hypocrisy of the supposedly progressive, well-off people who follow outdated patriarchal norms; norms that inevitably lead to violence which in the middle-class setting is often not physical, but psychological or economical. Therefore, it is usually invisible, perceived as less severe, and as such treated as a normal part of life.

[19] *bujhte pāri ekṭā śakta kholaser madhye bās karchi. biśvāser, śikṣār, saṁskārer abhyeser śakta khola. seṭā bheṅe bār haoẏā ye bhīṣaṇ kaṭhin.* English translation: Basu 2020: 172.

Basu focuses also on the problem of internalised patriarchy. Her female protagonists remain deeply attached to values, norms, and views they acquired in the process of socialization. The older ones—mothers-in-law, aunts—usually take the role of the custodians of religious and family traditions, often imposing rules on younger women. That gives them certain power and influence they had been denied when they were young themselves. The new generation of women, on the other hand, represents the in-betweens: women who want to live up to the ideal imposed on them, but also revolt against the social expectations and the patriarchal system. Fighting for their own rights and the rights of other women is an empowering experience for them. However, this seems to give them only satisfaction—but no happiness or peace they dream of.

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