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Refugee Life and the Discourse of Dignity in the Short Fiction of Jatin Bala

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Abstract. The refugee has always occupied an abject position within the official discourses of nationhood, citizenship and belonging. Politically and legally identified as an 'other', the refugee's personhood, most often, fails to receive acknowledgement of its due humanity. Not only do refugees lose voice and identity in relocating to a new country but often the essential dignity of life itself is compromised for them to the greatest possible extent. Characterized perpetually as aliens, intruders and villains who constitute a drain upon the economic resources of the host country, they are always held under suspicion – legal and cultural – and constitute the most marginalized population group in any society. This paper seeks to read Dalit refugee life as put forward in the short fiction of Jatin Bala and seeks to pay attention to its invigorative potential in crafting a discourse of human dignity.

Keywords : Dalit; dignity; refugee; marginalization; resilience; strength.

"...I have lived in three refugee camps since the age of four and a half, silently witnessed great atrocities of caste, worked as a farm hand in fields to feed myself, studied in the railway platform," states Jatin Bala in a conversation contained in *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal*. (216) Born on 5th May, 1949 at Parhiyali, Manirampur in Jessore in East Pakistan, now in Bangladesh, Jatin Bala is an award-winning and widely regarded fiction writer. A refugee and a Dalit, his powerful and poignant writing spans the trajectory of physical and emotional trauma and dehumanization from the doubly marginalized position of the Dalit refugee. Orphaned at an early age, Bala migrated from Bangladesh to India during the communal riots and making his way through several refugee camps, settled here permanently, going on to obtain a Masters degree in Bengali literature from the University of Calcutta. Embarking on his career as a teacher, he later joined The West Bengal Government's Youth Welfare Department as an officer. Author of fourteen books including an autobiography, Bala's life has been a living testimony to poverty, discrimination, human cruelty, state torture, as also faithful resilience, defiant resistance and proud assertion against his circumstances.

Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives of Bengal brings to readers a valuable collection of twelve short stories by Jatin Bala that narrate, assess and critique the various historical dimensions of the Dalit refugee experience in West Bengal. The first eleven of these stories are from the original *Samaj Chetanar Galpo* (The Story of Consciousness of Society) published in 2012 by *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World), a pioneering journal of Bengali

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read and relied upon for philosophical replenishment and affirmative activist action every single time the human spirit is in need of strength, succour and hope.

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