



# Transcending the class barrier: Aalo Andhari by Baby Halder

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The question isn't who's going to let me; it is who is going to stop me

Ayn Rand

This is not just a quote; it is a real-life experience which women deal with every day and the battles they fight are unaccounted for and go unsung. When we talk of violation, the reference may not necessarily be about the physical front only- a silent and a much bigger violation- that of the intellect has been lying ignored and on the side-lines of the gender dialogue. The women have deliberately been robbed of their space as thinking individuals. When we talk of gender equality, the idea is not to try to upset the apple cart, but to make the cart roll on both it's wheels.

The writer taken up for study is Baby Halder, a housemaid by profession, but a sensitive, thinking, expressive individual at heart. Her novel Aalo Andhari has autobiographical undertones. Born in Kashmir, she spent her childhood in Dalhousie. A domestic worker, who had to fight poverty, abuse and violence at a very young age. Married at the age of 13 to a man twice her age and becoming a mother at 14. She had a difficult childhood and an even more difficult married life. Dealing with poverty and an abusive husband, she drifted to different places in search of a job as a housemaid. Aalo Andhari is her story. The sufferings she undergoes, the disappointments, the disgust that her husband inspires in her and the transmogrification of the passive acceptance of her marriage into contemplating escape.

Baby recalls: “He treated me as if I were an animal”

Three crucial phases in her life sapped her energy. First, when her mother abandoned her, second when she lost her sister and was left at the mercy of her irresponsible and apathetic father and the third, when she was married at the age of 13.

It was only after didi went away, that we realized how difficult things could be without a mother. Where the moment had come for didi to leave she cried, saying that if Ma had not gone, we wouldn't have had to shoulder this burden. (8)

This is the story of a child, who without knowing the meaning of motherhood, became a mother. Her bond with her sister was snapped when she lost her sister at the hands of her murderous brother-in-law.

“My cousin sister gave me strength, She made me think, I wanted to see if I could live by myself and bring up my children on my own. Even when I lived with my husband, I was working in other people's houses. I could do the same staying alone with my children, why should I bear all the beatings, *ashanti* and violence?” Baby's brother and sister-in-law taunted her with the proverbial “everyone had fights at home, do they all run away?” but “I thought, I'd already lost my sister and my mother to this malaise, why should I suffer as well?”

A perceptive reading of Aalo Andhari shows the life of Baby, from the perspective of an underprivileged woman, that probes into the realms of the psyche of many Indian women wherein the victimization turns out to be a result of her endurance to suffering and abuse. Baby decided to take the reins of her life in her own hands and showed tremendous courage in leaving her oppressive husband and heading off to Delhi. Alone in a big city with two dependant children to feed and little education to her credit, she took to working as a domestic help in some of the wealthiest households, where again she was ill treated and exploited. Expected to serve her employers' every demand, she faced a staggering workload that often left her no time to care for her own children. Her life took a turn for the good when she met Prof. Prabodh Kumar, the

grandson of Munshi Premchand. She started working for Prof. Prabodh full time. He became the inspiration and a pillar of strength for Baby in her journey from kitchens to conference rooms. Baby Halder liberated herself from the unjust taboos that bound her to an imposed relation that forced her to pledge subjugation to a man who had no respect for her.

Aalo Andhari is a stirring memoir in which Baby picks up threads from her tattered life and weaves a story about liberation and empowerment. The book opens up a new world with ease and without any literary pretensions. Her everyday ordeals seem to be a result of not just external forces, but a far more complex and intricate with greater economic and social dimensions, ramifications and repercussions. Despite having gone through the bitter experiences, Baby in her book does not show any spite, regret or rancour that might be expected. She becomes a torchbearer for the women against a heavily pitted patriarchal society—A society that exalts the woman to the stature of a goddess and treats her worse than trash as Mulk Raj Anand opines:

Obviously, a woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a goddess, but mostly pampered as a doll or kept down and oppressed.... the Indian woman nearly drifted along and became bound to man, more and more as a slave, less and less as an individual apart.

Her novel explores the pugnacious journey of a domestic help—the journey of a woman born and trapped in poverty, yet undaunted and eventually finding her space.

Baby Halder's Aalo Andhari opens a new world with ease and without any literary pretensions. Though being suppressed and inhabiting the peripherals, she has made every effort to give voice to her silence and liberate herself. She transcends not only the subaltern plane but also the class barrier from being a housemaid to being an accomplished writer.