



## **“Kaibartakatha”- An Exploration of Dalit Life**

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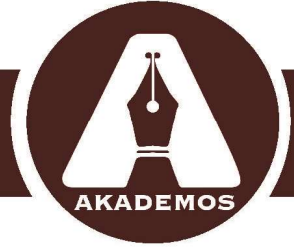
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### Abstract

The term ‘Dalit’ is a Sanskrit word which means ‘oppressed’ or ‘downtrodden’. Dalits in Indian sub-continent have been socio-economically oppressed for centuries. They are considered ‘untouchables’ by orthodox Hindus and Hindu theology because of their associations with occupations traditionally regarded as impure. “Kaibartakatha”, autobiography of Harishankar Jaldas, recounts his experiences of growing up as a dalit (fishermen community- ‘Jaldas’) in Bangladesh. This paper tries to analyse the condition of Dalit and the nature of their marginalization in our society. Traditionally, they have been denied of their basic human rights such as food, home, and education. This paper seeks to explore the inequality and discrimination a person faces just because of his birth. The socio-economic-religious reasons that compel a Dalit to become the subject of social humiliation and cultural subjugation, are the main focus of this paper. Also it shows clearly how ‘Manusmriti’ and ‘Brahminic hegemony’ is still at work in our society.

**Keywords:** Dalit-literature, Inequality, Discrimination, Marginalisation, problems and struggles of fishermen community





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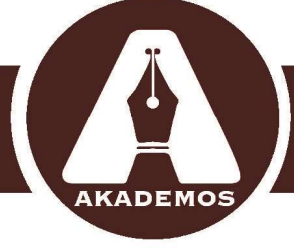
### **Introduction**

Autobiography was accepted as a distinct literary genre in the late 18th century. Robert Southey in 1809 coined the term to describe the work of Francisco Viera, a Portuguese poet. According to Felicity Nussbaum, professor of English at the University of California, autobiography had become a matter of established usage by the 1830s. Autobiography offers us a special kind of truth. Famous novelist Graham Green termed autobiography as ‘a sort of life’ as it tells the story of one's life, reshaped by recollection with conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions. French professor and essayist Philippe Lejeune defined the term as a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence focusing on his Individual life in on the development of his personality"(Andersen 2001: 2). According to this definition, autobiography offers a first-hand account into the life of the person we are reading about. It gives us a better insight into his or her life and experiences s/he faced and how these experiences shaped his or her personality.

This genre takes a distinct turn in the hands of the Dalit writers. Through the autobiography of the Dalit writers, we get a rare inner view of a lived experience. Dalit autobiography tells us about ‘pain’ and ‘denial of opportunities’ (Singh Vaibhav, 2008). They do not have the right to live as an ordinary human being. The 'self' in the autobiography becomes a symbol of all other Dalit experiences of denial humiliation and trauma. Ranjith Thankappan in the essay ‘Life, history and politics: Kallen Pokkudan’s two autobiographies and the Dalit print imaginations in Keralam’, termed Dalit autobiography writings as “counter historical narrative” as they challenge the Canonical history with their “own slice of history” (Thankappan, 2021: p206). It becomes a weapon in the hands of the Dalit writers to express their anguish against the Brahminical hegemony and Varna system that had caused severe pain, suffering, exclusion and discrimination resulting in the marginalisation of the Dalit community for more than two thousand years.

Harishankar Jaldas was born in 1955 in a village of Chattogram, Bangladesh. He Studied in Patanga high school and later in Chattagram College and University. He became a lecturer in 1984 in a government college. He got his Ph.D. in 2007 for his research on representation of





river and the life of fishermen in Bengali novels. He has also published various research book on the lives of fishermen.

He has written novels like "Jalputra", "Dahankal", "Kosbi" etc. His autobiography "Kaibartakatha" (কৈবর্তকথা) focuses on the life of the writer and the fishermen community.

As he himself belongs to the fishermen community, so we get a rare glimpse of the inner world of the fishermen community, their lives, struggles and hardships. He got the award of the best new writer by Dainik Jugantor in 2007 for his autobiography "Kaibartakatha".

The autobiography by Prof. Harishankar Jaldas, presents the true condition of the Jaldas (fishermen) community in Bangladesh. The picture he portrays of the 'Jaldas' community (fishermen broadly falling under 'Dalit') is somewhat true for the whole of the Indian sub-continent. The author narrated the story of his life, the problems he faced as a child and the struggle afterwards. It helps us to understand what it means exactly when we are born as Dalit. In this essay, I would try to examine closely various aspects of Jaldas and in extension 'Dalit' community.

### **On Identity:**

“জেলেরা আজ তাদের পদবি বদলে ফেলছে। ‘জলদাস’ পদবি ত্যাগ করে চট্টগ্রামের অধিকাংশ জেলে তাদের নামের শেষে ‘দাশ’ লিখতে শুরু করেছে। শিক্ষিত জেলেরা স্কুলে ভর্তি করানোর সময় তাদের সন্তানদের নামের শেষে ‘রায়’, ‘সেন’, ‘দাশগুপ্ত’, ‘চৌধুরী’ প্রভৃতি পদবি যুক্ত করে দিচ্ছে।”

(ভূমিকা, ‘কৈবর্তকথা’ – হরিশংকর জলদাস)

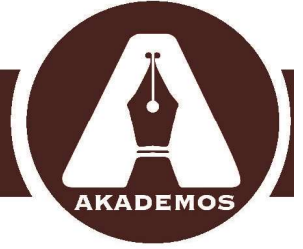
“Now the fishermen are changing their surname. Most fishermen of Chattogram have abandoned their surname ‘Jaldas’ and started to write ‘Das’ as their surname.”

(Introduction, ‘Kaibartakatha’ – Harishankar Jaldas, self-translation)

The lines quoted above from the autobiography posit before us the question of Identity and change of it. Now, what is ‘Identity’?

Identity ‘is a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities.’ (Jenkins, 2008)





It encompasses the memories, experiences, relationships and values that create one's sense of self. Identity formation has three key components:

1. Discovering and developing one's potential
2. Realizing the purpose of life
3. Finding opportunities to exercise that potential and purpose

Now, in this context, we would try to understand the identity of the Jaldas community and the reason why many of them are trying to change it.

'Jaldas' belongs to the fishermen community, broadly within Dalit. The word 'Dalit' originates from the Sanskrit word 'dal' which means 'split, break, crack or crushed' (Teltumbe 2021: 1). It signifies 'oppressed', 'downtrodden' or 'exploited' (Teltumbe 2021: 2). They have been subjected to numerous social obstructions and subjugations evolving from the age-old tradition of Brahminic Hegemony. They have been treated as inferior. Anand Teltumbe, in his book *Dalit Past, Present and Future* regarded the lowest status of Dalit in the Hindu Social Order as the main reason behind the unequal treatment of Dalit. He pointed out also that Dalits were historically excluded from most situations in social, cultural, religious and economic life for over two millennia (Teltumbe 2021: 1). According to the Vedas, they have no place at all. Vedas divided Hindu Society into four 'Varnas'. This division was based upon social occupation:

- Brahmin (Priest and Teacher)
- Kshatriya (Ruler, Warrior)
- Vaishya (Trade)
- Sudra (Servant)

This is the theoretical framework. According to this system, there is no place for Dalits. Within this, there is the concept of 'Jati' which is used for practical purposes. So, in daily life, 'Jati' is the main operative conception of caste rather than 'Varna' (Mendelsohn, Vicziany 1998: 6). As Dalits performed various works traditionally regarded as low, they are treated as 'untouchables'. This include skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather, making shoes, playing in musical bands, butchery, fishing, human waste removal, attendance at cremation grounds, washing clothes etc (Mendelsohn, Vicziany 1998: 7). As a result, they have been facing permanent obstacles in every sphere of life. A person can be humiliated easily if he/she belongs to the Dalit community by the upper-castes. They have been subjected to numerous human rights violations till today. They are treated as if they are not human. This, in turn, affects their identity. It becomes an impossible task to cross the barriers constructed historically against them



in order to realize their own 'self' and explore the potentials. So, in order to avoid the shame of their birth they are in search of a new identity that would give them a space to breathe freely. Indeed, this has been pointed out by the author himself:

“সামাজিক নির্যাতন থেকে রেহাই পাওয়ার জন্য হীনম্মন্যতা থেকে মুক্তি পাওয়ার জন্য, তারা এই লুকোচুরির আশ্রয়নিচ্ছে .....জেলে সন্তান হিসেবে পরিচয় পেলে স্কুল, কলেজ এমনকি বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়েও সহপাঠীরা নানাভাবে বিপন্ন-বিপর্যস্ত করার চেষ্টা করে, তার মধ্যে মানসিক নির্যাতন প্রধান। জেলেরা আজ 'ডোম' নামে অভিহিত হচ্ছে। ধর্মীয় ও সামাজিক অনুষ্ঠানে তাদের কোণঠাসা করে রাখার প্রবণতা আজও বর্ণবাদী সমাজে সর্গর্বে বিরাজমান। এসকল বিপর্যয়-বিষন্নতা থেকে রেহাই পাবার জন্য জেলেরা আজ পদবির ময়ূরপুচ্ছ ধারণ করছে, করতে বাধ্য হচ্ছে। কিন্তু কোনোভাবে এই মেকি-পুচ্ছধারণের রহস্য উদঘাটিত হয়ে পড়লে তারা নানারকম মর্মঘাতী উপহাসের সম্মুখীন হচ্ছে।

ব্যাপারটি বেদনাদায়ক হলেও সত্যি যে অশিক্ষিত-অর্ধশিক্ষিত-শিক্ষিত নির্বিশেষে সকল জেলেই আজ শুধুমাত্র সম্প্রদায়গত পদবির জন্য নিন্দিত হচ্ছে, লাঞ্ছিতও হচ্ছে কোথাও কোথাও, কখনো কখনো। এর হাত থেকে বাঁচার জন্য তারা পদবি বিসর্জনের লুকোচুরি করছে।”( জলদাস, ভূমিকা, কৈবর্তকথা, ২০১১)

“They are choosing this path of dishonesty in order to escape from the social oppression and the sense of inferiority. In the school, college, even in the university, their classmates try to humiliate them in many ways if their identity is exposed. Mental harassment is the main among the ways they get harassed. Fishermen are being called as 'Dom' (attendant at cremation grounds). The tendency of the society based on 'Varna' system is to Corner them in various religious and social events. So, fishermen are changing or rather being compelled to change their surnames in order to escape from mental harassment and humiliation. But if this thing gets exposed they have to face some rather serious gibe.

It is painfully true that only for the community surname, all the fishermen - illiterate, half-learned or learned -are getting harassed or being condemned in some places. Sometimes they are hiding or changing their surname just to escape from all of these experiences.”

[Self-translation] (Jaldas, Introduction, 'Kaibartakatha', 2011)





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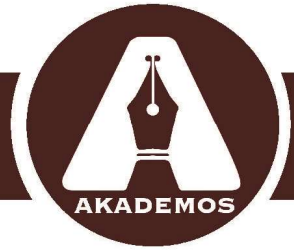
There are various other aspects of being a Dalit. We encounter many incidents of the life of the writer. Harishankar Jaldas came to Chattogram town in 1993. He faced extreme trouble to find a house for rent as he belonged to 'Jaldas' community. He was told in rather straight-forward manner that the house was meant for gentlemen and not for a person like him:

“১৯৯৩ সালে আমার প্রিয় গ্রাম, প্রিয়তর জেলে পাড়াটিকে ছেড়ে আমাকে চট্টগ্রাম শহরে চলে আসতে হল। কিছু পারিবারিক সংকটে আমাকে এই সিদ্ধান্ত নিতে হয়েছিল। যাইহোক, এইসময়ে আমি এবং আমার স্ত্রী চট্টগ্রামের ইকবাল রোড, আরসিচার্চ রোড, ব্যান্ডেল রোড, ব্রিকফিল্ড রোড, বংশাল রোডের অলিতে গলিতে ভাড়া বাসা খুঁজে মরেছি। কিন্তু বাসা আমরা পাইনি কোন বাসার ভাড়া আমার আয়ের সঙ্গে সঙ্গতিপূর্ণ নয় বলে নিতে পারিনি। অধিকাংশ বাসা আমাকে দেয়া হয়নি। বাসা ভাড়া নিতে গেলে বাড়িওয়ালারা কি কাজ করি, পরিবারের সদস্য সংখ্যা কত নাম কি ইত্যাদি প্রশ্ন জিজ্ঞাসা করে। প্রথমদিকের প্রশ্নগুলোর উত্তরতাদের সন্তুষ্টি দিতে পারলেও শেষপ্রশ্নের উত্তরে যেই না বলেছি- আমার নাম হরিশংকর জলদাস, অমনি তাদের হাসিহাসি মুখ ম্লান হয়ে গেছে। কেউ মুখের উপর বলে দিয়েছে-আপনাদের এই বাড়ি ভাড়া দেয়া হবে না আবার কেউ কেউ ভদ্রতা করে বলেছে - পরে যোগাযোগ করুন। পরে যোগাযোগ করলে বলেছে- না ভাড়া দেওয়া যাবে না। আপনাদের ভাড়া দেয়ার ব্যাপারে আমাদের পরিবারের সবাই একমত হতে পারিনি। সেন্ট প্লাসিড হাইস্কুলের উত্তর দিকের এক বিল্ডিং- এর মালিকান আমার স্ত্রীকে স্পষ্টভাষায় বলেছে, ‘দেখেন, এই বিল্ডিংটা বানানো হয়েছে ভদ্রলোকদের ভাড়া দেয়ার জন্য , জেলেদের ভাড়া দেওয়ার জন্য নয়। ‘আমার নিরুপায় স্ত্রী সেদিন বোধহয় বাসাটা পাওয়ার জন্য মাত্রাতিরিক্ত বুলাবুলাি করেছিল। কলেজ শিক্ষক হওয়ার পরও ওই মহিলার কাছে আমি ভদ্রলোক হয়ে উঠতে পারিনি- শুধু মাত্র জেলের ঘরে জন্মানোর অপরাধে। শুধু জেলে হবার অপরাধে সরকারি কলেজে অধ্যাপনা করেও আমি ভদ্র অঞ্চলে সেদিন বাসা ভাড়া পাইনি।”

( জলদাস, কৈবর্তকথা, ২০১১ : ১৭ )

“In 1993, I came to Chattagram town leaving my dearest village. I had to take this decision due to some family reasons. In that time, I and my wife had searched a





home for rent in every lanes of Iqbal Road, R. C.Church Road, Bandel Road, Brickfield Road and Bansal Road. But we didn't get it. In some cases, money was the problem, but in most of the cases, they were not given rent to me just because of my caste. When I went to take the home for rent, landlords asked me various questions such as what is my profession, how many members are there in my family etc. My answers were at first satisfactory, but when I said my name 'Harishankar Jaldas' to them, their face became pale. Some of them said it on my face that the house would not be offered as rent to us. Some of them, out of manners, told us to contact later. When we did contact them later, we were informed that the house would not be offered as rent to us as their family members did not agree to offer the home as rent to us. A landlady of a building on the north of St. Placid's School told my wife clearly, "Look! This building has been made for the gentlemen and not for the fishermen." Perhaps, my helpless wife was a little desperate on that day. Though I was a lecturer in college, still I was not a gentleman to that lady as I was a fisherman by birth. Just because of my birth, I didn't get rent in the locality of gentlemen though I was a lecturer in a government college."

[Self-translation] (Jaldas, 'Kaibartakatha', 2011:17)

He also narrated how a person named 'DumurDas' used to troll his family indirectly everyday just because of his caste. Truly, across the south-east Asia, Untouchables or Dalits are subject to numerous humiliations. They face discriminations and oppressions in every aspect of life. These discriminations and oppressions have been normalized in our society from the time immemorial. For centuries, they had to live in the outskirts of the village. They were not allowed to enter the houses of upper-caste Hindus. So, the discrimination and marginalization exist still, but in another form.

### **Food and Water:**

Eminent Historian, Prof. B.D. Chattopadhyay in a discussion 'Caste System in India: Its historical impact and influence on other Religions', mentioned food sharing as a major criteria of caste-system. The system determines with whom you can share your food. In the same discussion, Prof. Ranbir Chakraborty later explained the topic further. He pointed out that the key thing in this is the purity-pollution dichotomy. The Untouchables or Dalits have always been portrayed as the polluted whereas the Brahmins are the symbol of purity. There is no problem as





long as one takes fruits or raw vegetables from an untouchable but in the case of cooked food, the Purity-Pollution dichotomy becomes crucial. He further added that to cook, we need to mix water with the raw vegetables and according to the system, a Brahmin can't take water from a Dalit. In this framework, taking cooked meal from the Untouchables/Dalits is a serious matter of pollution. We can refer to a Jataka story which tells us the story of a Brahmin who shared the food of an untouchable, and later died in despair in the forest.

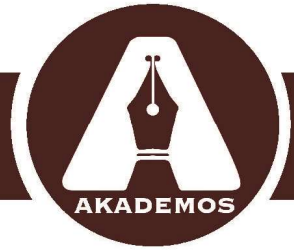
Two incidents from 'Kaibartakatha' are important in this respect. The first is from his experience of going to a marriage ceremony as a member of musical band. He was a child then. They went to the ceremony and performed music. For a long time, they were not offered any food. At last, they were offered food; it was in a manner fitted to the undesirable. They were offered food in a banana leaf, not in a plate meant for the guests. It was done in order to avoid the cleaning of the plate. You have to touch the leftovers of a Dalit and that is a matter of serious pollution. The place designated for them to eat was beside a dustbin. Surely, we can imagine the dirt, the smell of the rotten things and the picture of a happy child taking his lunch beside the dustbin.

“আরও প্রায় আধঘণ্টা পর আমাদের খেতে দেয়া হলো, উঠানের এককোণে, আঁস্তাকুড়ের পাশে। একটা বাঁশ পেতে বসতে দেয়া হয়েছিল। কলাপাতায় ভাত দেয়া হয়েছিল – ভাতের উপর ডাল, ঘন্ট ও একটা করে মাছের লেজ। অতিথিদের আরো নানা লোভনীয় খাবার পরিবেশন করা হলেও আমাদের কপালে তা জোটেনি। ক্ষুধার প্রবল চাপে তখন আমাদের শরীরের তাপ লোপ পেতে বসেছে। আমরা গোথাসে খাবার গিলছি। এইসময় গৃহকর্তার কণ্ঠ আমার কানে আবার ভেসে এল, ‘অ সুশীল, টুইল্যা অলোরেক ও, খাওনের পর আঁইড়া আর কলাপাতা যে এনখাল পাড়ত পেলাই দি আইয়ে। হিতারার আঁইডাকে উছুঁইতো নো। বৈরাগী টুইল্যাদের মত আমিও সেদিন নির্বিকার ছিলাম। বুঝিনি কিছুই। ভেবেছি – এটাই নিয়ম, আমাদের জন্য নির্ধারিত প্রথা। আজকে ভাবছি – বিয়ের অনুষ্ঠানে এই দুইজন অপরিহার্য হলেও সমাজজীবনে এরা অস্পৃশ্য, অচ্যুত। সেদিনও যেমন ছিল, আজকেও তেমনি আছে।” ( জলদাস, কৈবর্তকথা, ২০১১ : ৪৯-৫০ )

“Our food was given after half an hour in the corner beside the dustbin. We were given a bamboo to seat. The rice was given in a banana leaf. There were also 'daal',







'ghonto' and a piece of the tail of the fish. Though the guests were offered various types of tasty and good foods, clearly we were not lucky enough to get that. We were so hungry that we nearly lost our senses. We ate as fast as we could. Just at that moment we heard the voice of the landlord, "Sushil, tell your men to throw the banana leaves at the side of the canal. Nobody will touch the eaten leftover of them." I was silent on that day like other members of the bandsmen. I didn't understand it. I thought this was the rule and this was destined for us. Today, I think that though they were necessary in the marriage ceremony but they were untouchables in the social life. This is true even for today."

[Self-translation] (Jaldas, 'Kaibartakatha', 2011: 49-50)

There is another incident where the writer went to the house of his friend. He was treated well and offered nice companion and it was all good as it could be. Later, he came to know that they cleaned everything as he was a son of a fisherman. A Dalit has to face these experiences. It creates in them a sense of exclusion. That they are undesirable, becomes evident to them.

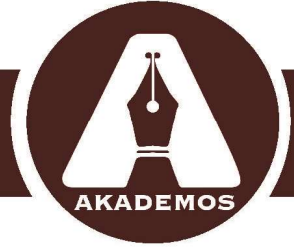
### **Poverty and Social Exclusions:**

Harishankar Jaldas vividly describes how his father struggled for the most part of his life to make both ends meet. He had to work all day long in order to feed his family. He was sick and rather skinny. They had only two rooms including a kitchen. There were around nine or ten members in the family. The outside of the house was muddy. The writer had to go to the school carrying books and hunger at the same time. He also had to help his father in order to earn the livelihood. He always felt the grinding pressure of being a prey to poverty. Indeed, in many ways, poverty is the darkest night one could possibly imagine.

According to APA (American Psychological Association), poverty has a wide range of negative impacts on our life. Poverty goes hand in hand with homelessness or sub-standard housing, malnutrition, inadequate child care, lack of access to health care etc. It is also an important reason behind poor academic achievement, school drop-out, abuse and neglect. A child also faces behavioral and socio-emotional problems along with development delays. Poverty also has a negative impact on our society. So, in many ways, removal of poverty is important to create a healthy and balanced society.

Social Exclusion, in this case the exclusion of Dalits, is closely linked with poverty. Socially excluded groups face a lot of problems regarding participation in the economy. Due to the over-





dominance of the exclusionary frameworks, they don't have much access in the market economy and public services. In this way, the historic-socio-cultural exclusion of normalized in the psyche of the people. As they are excluded, they don't have the opportunity to increase their income. The concept of social capital is also important in this respect. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Social Capital involves the potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through membership in social networks.' Social Capital is based on three important aspects:

1. Social ties or participation
2. Levels of trust that characterizes these ties.
3. Resources of benefits that are both gained and transferred by virtue of social ties and social participation. (Social Capital, Margarita Poteyeva)

Prof. Amartya Sen in his book 'Identity and Violence' pointed out that social capital can also exclude many people though it 'Warmly embraces others' (Sen, 2007: 2). To speak plainly, the rich and the powerful (not only in terms of money but also in terms of social, political, cultural achievement) have their own spheres of influence. They have their own community to support them. People, who are not part of that community, have no capital to fall back on. So, the Dalits remain excluded as they have no social capital. The vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion gets difficult to break.

### **Conclusion:**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) clearly states that:

- All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. (Article 1)
- Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (Article 2)
- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. (Article 3)



Dalits have been denied off all these rights. They have been subjected to injustices, inhuman treatments and oppressions; exposed to pain, horror and humiliation that perhaps a non-dalit can hardly imagine. They live in the same earth, grow up in the same sunlight, breathe in the same air, and yet they are the 'untouchables'. 'Kaibartakatha' compels us to think about the treatment of Dalits in our society. B.R. Ambedkar, in his 'Annihilation of Caste', pointed out that caste is not "a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire" preventing the Hindus from co-mingling, rather it is a 'notion' or 'state of mind' (Ambedkar, 2014: 124). He further expressed that to destroy the caste system, we need to change the notion at first. While the process of change is at work, we can always remember the words of American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou:

"The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom."  
(‘Caged Bird’)

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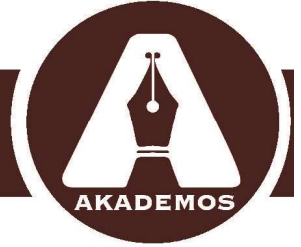
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