

Hegemonic Inheritance and the Intergenerational Reproduction of Caste through the Architecture of Humiliation in Select Dalit Testimonios

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Abstract: This research paper explores how caste is systematically reproduced across generations by cultural, institutional and psychological processes or mechanisms that can be called the “architecture of humiliation”. The study is based on the “Savarna consciousness” as hegemony and the “spontaneous consent” of social structures and the idea of “cultural capital” created by Pierre Bourdieu. Using a textual analysis of selected Dalit testimonios, the paper explores the space of segregation in the basti as a first site of reproduction, the pedagogy of humiliation in schools and the paradox of religious institutions. The results show how the “inferiority” and “psychological burden” of “passing” are being passed on from generation to generation. The results illustrate how “inferiority” and the “psychological burden” of “passing” are being transmitted from one generation to the next. .

Keywords: Hegemony' and Hegemonic Inheritance, psychological burden, Savarna consciousness

Introduction

The stories of the Dalits or reduction of them to the stock categories of class. Using the life narrative as a medium, or "testimonio", these authors – Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Yashica Dutt – have recovered “silenced histories” that serve as a "site of counter-memory to power". This paper is a research paper that examines how these writers examine the "architecture of humiliation"—physical, institutional, and psychological—to understand that it is not ancient but merely a current hegemonic inheritance that is handed down from one generation to the next. In order to grasp these structures of exclusion that these authors contest, one must return to Antonio Gramsci and his notion of hegemony. According to Gramsci, hegemony is the "spontaneous consent" of the masses to the manner in which they are being directed in social life by the dominant group. In India, this hegemony assumes the form of a "caste organization" which is regarded as an important instrument in safeguarding "civilizing homogeneity". This system makes it possible for the marginalized to "voluntarily hold themselves apart" from their "degraded" status, which is internalized, and creates a psychological conditioning that has taken place over the course of centuries.

This systemic dominance is further explained through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "cultural capital. This is an “invisible package of unearned assets”, says Yashica Dutt, who refers to this capital as "dispositions/behaviors/values that are passed on through generations. A caste's educational heritage, professional connections and financial acumen ensure success; the same education, finance, and professional connections are denied to Dalits. This divide is powerfully illustrated by the metaphor of “theoretical spoon” born to some, and “empirical pot” born to the vast majority of people, as Gopal Guru mentions in Scholar's Call. This ‘pot’ metaphor is a reference to the historical tradition of Dalits having to wear pots to collect their spit, and the fact of the intergenerational transmission of Dalit stigma that needs to be challenged through radical narrativization.

Hegemonic inheritance is first inscribed in the physical environment. Reproduction of social distance from one generation to the next in Indian village, is the organising of the social space. Scholar Indulata Prasad explains this as 'caste-ing space' that reinforces social stigma. Valmiki's and Bama's childhoods are physically confined to what they call "basti" or "cheri" (separate village), where their "bastis" were located, away from "pollution" by upper caste people.



The descriptions in the testimonios are intentional and not pretty, but rather disturbing when discussing these spaces. Valmiki's dwelling place in Joothan is in front of a "stinking cowshed" and a "filthy pond" named Dabbowali. The need of women to defecate in the open was a violation of what was called "the bare minimum qualities of human existence", which took place in this pond. This was a spatial segregation in the sense that Dalit children were taught their "place" even before they went to the classroom. In Karukku, Bama reiterates this, saying her village was beautiful, but the Dalits walked on the "other streets" where she says the land-owning Naicker community were kept away "to retain ritual purity". This is a physical isolation which is meant for reproduction and Dalit children are born in the atmosphere of poverty which has been declared as supreme and basic civic amenities are neglected.

Education, as emancipatory tool, is generally understood, but sources show the functioning of schools as caste-control devices and the reproduction of hierarchy through a focus on Dalit's self-worth. Valmiki sweeps the entire courtyard of the school yard for three days in the absence of study as a part of the punishment imposed by Kaliram, headmaster for the entire school. The boy reads his headmaster Kaliram's words and decides to sweep courtyard of the entire school for 3 days instead of doing any studies. "Abey, Chuhre ke... Go sweep the whole playground", thundered the headmaster and by his abuse he created a visceral sense of power, which was an attempt to remind the child of his "servility by inheritance. These doers of injustice thought that his education was "unjustifiable", and wanted him back in the "kind of work for which [he] was born".

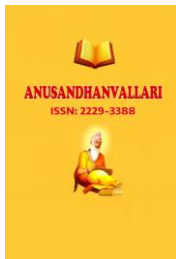
Shailaja Paik sees this as a "history of hurt and humiliation", and that educational institutions are places of "othering" Dalits. Among lower-caste students, there is a tendency to consume syllabus material created by an upper caste intellectual which predominantly reflects "Savarna culture", making them feel alienated from their everyday experiences. This is the "banking model of education" when knowledge is a "gift" from the elite and not an act of inquiry on a two-way street. Bama affirms this experience, saying teachers had 'favourites' and that she knew they wouldn't 'ever choose someone like me'. In fact, even as a class topper Bama observes that 'caste discrimination prowls in every corner, in every crevice'.

The "architecture of humiliation" is also found in religious settings that are supposed to provide spiritual equality but feature tight hierarchies. This is the irony of the Christian community in TamilNadu, as seen in Bama's Karukku. The Church, popularly regarded as an egalitarian institution, had seating arrangements and did not allow dalities to hold the running of the Church. Bama remembers seeing an old Dalit person forced to carry a packet of food for a landlord who "wrote it by its string" since he couldn't touch it without being polluted.

Bama states that Dalits are slaves of God's, and notes that this shows that religious institutions are caste control devices. Her exit from the convent was a political gesture of agency because she knew that the Church's "civilising homogeneity" was simply a form of oppressing the downtrodden and enjoying "benefits and comforts" by the upper-dalits who were the Christians. This structuralized prejudice undermines the egalitarian myth and is an empirical fact: 'caste is a very concrete social logic that persists after religious conversion'.

The monopoly of occupation and symbolic degradation of the Dalit labour force perpetuates caste. The burden across generations is an epitaph most fitting to Valmiki's title, Joothan. It is a reference to the "scraps of food left on a plate—food which would be thrown away for humans or gather for animals" that "Dalits were "obligatory to acknowledge and eat... for centuries. Valmiki writes: "What sort of a life was that? Our work was hard and we had done it all day and all night, our price was joothan".

Thus offering food to the lower castes is an exercise of control by the higher castes to preserve the power structure. One such episode in Joothan is when Valmiki's mother, when working unpaid labour at a wedding, asks for fresh food for her children and is rebuked by the landlord; "You're taking a basketful of joothan... don't forget your place, Chuhri". This is an "impugning of the Dalit's humanity, dignity, and sense of value over generations", notes



Scholar Gopal Guru, and he is right. The waste food is regularly distributed to Dalits by the "mercy" of the elite, thus creating a "spontaneous consent" to servitude through material deprivation.

The more subtle aspect of reproduction is the internalisation of caste inferiority. Bama points out that Dalits have been "enslaved for generation after generation" and "have heard about their degradation so many times that they believe they are degraded, and willingly set themselves apart". This sense of self-doubt is strengthened by 'the standard bearers of this country's great culture', who teach feudalism instead of equality through scriptures.

Yashica Dutt discusses the current expression of this trauma in "passing". A series of mimicking by Dalits of upper-caste mannerisms, surnames and traditions to avoid trauma and to secure professional networks, are collectively referred to as "passing" and sociologically as "Sanskritization". All along her childhood and through her adult life, Dutt remembers her family's struggle to conceal their identity: "My Dalitness hung over me like a carcass in the wake I dragged through my childhood and into adulthood". This is a "dual life" based on the constant fear that they may be exposed. This is what Scholar Donna K. Bivens calls "internalized casteism" which is their being persuaded to "develop ideas, beliefs, actions, and behaviours that support or collude with" their own subjugation.

The reproduction of caste is part and parcel of the Brahmanical patriarchy where Dalit women suffer from a "double or triple burden". Dalit women suffer from 'triple marginalisation' of caste, class and gender. Bama portrays how lower caste women are "exploited by the men and women from the dominant caste". She tells us that even the upper-caste children would refer to her grandmother by her name, as she was a Dalit, irrespective of her age, as she had "inherited disdain and hate".

In addition, upper caste men tend to think of Dalit women as "sexual property", as pointed by Yashica Dutt, who attributes this mindset to structural violence that has existed for centuries. This "vulnerability of Dalit women" is created by the structural factors like patriarchy, caste and the institutional religious subjugation, which work to suppress Dalit community for generations. For the multiple and changing structural power relations that mainstream Indian feminism has tended to ignore, a "Dalit feminist standpoint" is required, writes scholar Sharmila Rege.

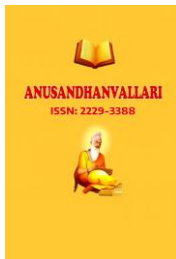
While Dalit assertion has spread from the village square to the city and the digital space, the "architecture of humiliation" has evolved into a new digital untouchability. Although digital spaces were initially perceived as "democratic sites" for resisting, the sources indicate that the dominant group has found alternative strategies to exclude others.

The RTI approach to Breaking the Cycle through Testimonio

The analysis of these three autobiographies shows how the reproduction of caste is neither a ritual in its entirety, but a process over time which is adjusting to modern institutions such as the school, the church and the online job market. In telling their trauma, however, Valmiki, Bama, and Dutt become "sites of counter-memory to power", a place in which memory is made.

"Dalit is not a caste but a realization" – Dalit in the words of Arjun Dangle is a revolutionary transformation of consciousness. In their writing these writers give the means to the next generations to break the "adamantine of caste hierarchy" and "restore [them to] their human dignity, equality, and respect". Their stories are a "manifesto for revolutionary change" and the "muteness" of the past is transformed forever to be the "voice" of a present that "calls for epistemic justice" and a "faith in a truly egalitarian society."

The most effective way to counter the "architecture of humiliation" is to put individual memory into a collective political archive. The collective operation of Dalit autobiographies demands that they be examined as more than 'life-writing,' but as 'testimonio,' or testimony to atrocity, and testimony to survival strategies. As opposed to the European traditional autobiographies, which focus on "bourgeois individualism," and private "I," Dalit



testimonios challenge these genre boundaries, displacing the individual “I” with the collectivity of the Dalits as community.

In Karukku, Bama clearly expands the scope of her story, confesses to it not being a story about her alone, but a "collective trauma" of whose length there is no measuring tape. These authors expose "shameful secrets" of caste violence inflictions and the role played by the state and religious institutions in persisting hegemonic structures, thus breaking the "aesthetic of silence. In the same way, it is asserted by Valmiki that these true depictions of wrongs will make sure that the history of Dalits will not be lost in the future. Part of this witnessing is a "site of counter-memory to power," recovering a history which mainstream "Savarna" histories have always been trying to obliterate or reduce to class categories.

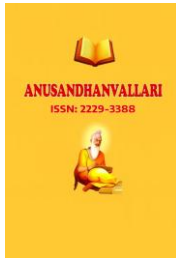
Though intergenerational reproduction of caste can take place through the vernaculars, which are often "heavily fraught with a Hindu consciousness that is patriarchal and caste-ridden," English has also emerged as an important means of subaltern agency. English is not only a language of aspiration for many Dalit writers, it is also a vehicle for emancipation, through its capacity to take them beyond the confines of the caste.

Coming Out as Dalit by Yashica Dutt reveals the way English education serves as "a ticket into upper-castenness" affording a level of protection against immediate discovery. The value and importance of the use of English is, however, far greater in its connection with transnational struggles for human rights. Valmiki and Bama were directly inspired by the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s, which was heavily influenced by the African-American civil rights movement. Dalit authors are able to speak the language of the international discourse and consequently their struggle is not shrouded within the ghetto but demands attention from the world at large and justice.

As Dalits move from 'physical segregation' towards the present day of urban living, the digital sphere has seen the emergence of 'digital untouchability' while Dalit writers have created 'subaltern counter-publics' in the same space, through the same mediums and devices. From physical segregation to contemporary urban life, the digital has become a space of 'digital untouchability' but at the same time it has also become a space of 'subaltern counter-publics' for Dalit writers, in the same space, with the same mediums and devices. The "Documents of Dalit Discrimination" created by Yashica Dutt on Tumblr is an example of how a digital space can be democratic; there is no traditional hierarchisation and gate keeping.

In this new frontier, however, a modern "architecture of humiliation" is raised. The voices of dalits have been frequently extracted by mainstream media, without permission or credit, from dalit-run websites such as Dalit Camera and Round Table India, using subaltern labour. Moreover, Dutt spells out the "digitalization of color bias" in the Social Media filters, which make white people's color images look more neutral which reinforces the ancient Vedic correlation of fair skin and "touchability". Yet, Dalits are now using digital campaigning as a way to channel their rage into something powerful; Facebook and Twitter have become platforms for exposing atrocities that happen to Dalits on a regular basis, but that are seldom reported in traditional newspapers.

An analysis of these testimonios has shown that it is necessary to break through the hegemonic inheritance in order to transform consciousness. As Arjun Dangle's famous statement says “Dalit is not a caste but a realization” which is connected to the struggles of the ones who are in the bottom of society. This awareness requires a "new dictionary" for Dalit writing; a pantheon of words that does not fit into the “refined” vocabulary of the dominant literary tradition, but that is necessary for the description of objects and activities of Dalit life, including the smell of raw hides or the ritual of eating “joothan”. Dalit aesthetics are deliberately counter to the hegemonic concepts of “beauty” and “craft” in favor of an aesthetic of “painful reality,” where the authenticity of experience is most salient feature. Dalit writers have challenged the “banking model of education” that sees knowledge as a gift of the “elite” to “unlettered” others, bringing themselves to the fore as “speaking subjects” rather than “mute objects” of history, and creating alternative ways of knowing.



Conclusion

The cases of social untouchability to digital untouchability highlight that caste is a dynamic and a “concrete social logic” that persists after it has been outlawed by law, by virtue of its hegemony. The "architecture of humiliation" - extreme spatial segregation and institutional "othering" and unequal transfer of cultural capital - ensures, that burden of caste continues to get transferred to the next generation. But as the testimonies of Omprakash Valmiki, Bama and Yashica Dutt show, it is a potent emancipative tool to tell the self. These writers have brought up unsung pasts and created an archive of resistance in the medium of the life story. Their take back of the voice and their use of language as their "only armor" has compelled a society which "masquerades itself as egalitarian" to face the reality of its social hierarchy. These are the necessary blueprints for a future based on "human dignity, equality, and respect," in all spaces—physical, institutional, and virtual—but the fight for the emancipation of people is far from over, and these texts call on people to persist in the struggle. Their efforts to break the "muteness" of the past is forever redefined as a revolutionary voice which calls for epistemic justice and eventual casting down of the caste system.

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