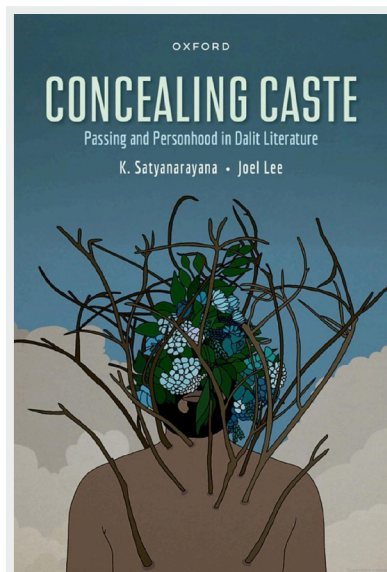


CONCEALING CASTE Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature

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Detected and Undetected Dalitness: The Un/Common Narratives of Caste Concealment

Caste pursues you—it follows like a shadow, or a tail, or the ghost of a murdered brahmin.

—“Raw Deal”, Surajpal Chauhan, 1999 (p. 90).

Concealing Caste: Passing and Personhood in Dalit Literature (hereafter *Concealing Caste*) reminds of *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle (1992), an anthology and translations from modern Marathi Dalit Literature that brought together poetry, autobiographical excerpts, and political essays. The book gave global academic currency to the world of the Dalits (ex-untouchables). In a similar fashion but going beyond the Marathi Dalit literary context, *Concealing Caste* brings together selected short stories and excerpts from autobiographical writings. Through these genres, *Concealing Caste* spotlights the history of eight decades. The narratives that appeared in the book were originally written in Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam and

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Telugu, as well as in English, spanning from 1930 to 2020 (pp. 5–6). Along with an Introduction, the book is divided into two parts: Part one is titled Short Stories, that curates eleven short stories, and the second part is titled as Autobiographical Writings that brings eight autobiographical excerpts into discussion. Interestingly, the book also adds a “Glossary of Terms, People and Places” and a “Glossary of Castes and Caste Titles”. K. Satyanarayana and Joel Lee, in their ‘Acknowledgements,’ artistically state that this book is like a garden, the cultivation of many hands and imagination, which is the heart, soul, and substance of this book.

Dalit literary expression is a conscious reflection of Phule-Ambedkar’s socio-political and cultural movement. It is a reclamation of human rights and dignity. The authors of this book clearly mention that “Ambedkar famously characterized the emancipatory project... ‘a battle for the reclamation of human personality’... ‘Personality’ in this usage denotes what is now often called personhood...the unmarked identity of the characters in the stories in this volume as nothing less than the desire to reclaim human personality” (p. 22). In the twenty-five-page Introduction, the book not only addresses the readers and scholars of caste studies in Indian academia, but also showcases a futuristic approach to advance the newly emerged field of research in American academia in particular and the academia in the West at large: Critical Caste Studies (Ayyathurai, 2021). The theoretical framework and critical themes in the book can help to mark and understand the ‘difference’ in reading caste and race. The co-authors of the volume hope that the book will generate a dialogue between Dalit and African American literature by reading and analysing the narratives of ‘caste concealment’ and ‘passing’ (p. 23). The main focus of the volume is on caste concealment with a discussion on passing and personhood, but along with this, the book also touches upon assertion and acknowledgement in analysing the practising of “impression management” and “subversive deconstruction” (p. 15). To understand the text and the context, Satyanarayana and Lee deploy their theories from Henry Louis Gates Jr., Elaine, Ginsberg, Sandra Harvey, and Erving Goffman’s subversive deconstruction of social hierarchy that proceeds through passing (pp. 12–15), analysing through the traditions of ‘descriptive sociology’(p. 14). Through Goffman’s idea, Satyanarayana and Lee write, “the impression management framework reminds us that caste concealment is but one of many interrelated modes of self-fashioning in everyday life, and that its operations significantly overlap with the everyday performance of selfhood and belonging in terms of gender, class, religion, sexuality, occupation and other axes of identity” (p. 16). This seems a somewhat limited approach as Baburao Bagul could be one of many examples wherein he not only wrote short stories but also made an attempt to theorise the Dalit discourse: e.g. Bagul’s *Dalit Sahitya: Aajche Krantividnyan* 1981 (*Dalit Literature: A Revolutionary Science of the Present*) is a ground-breaking work that theorises around the Dalit experience. It subsumes and invisibilises the development of Dalit theoretical tradition. Nevertheless, with the help of theories on passing and caste concealment, the book asks some pertinent questions: ‘Why expose a troubling revelation that invites criticism from the world?’ What insights can we gain from Dalit writing on caste concealment and vice versa from the

literature on racial passing in the United States? What can Dalit literature contribute to our understanding of hierarchy in sociology or anthropology, and how can literary studies benefit from the social scientific study of caste?

The volume is drawn through its three aims. One is to analyse the ways in which caste hierarchies operate and affect with its new angle as the narratives are subverted in stories around caste concealment. The second aim of the volume is to open a new window to have a comparative dialogue between African-American traditions of emancipatory ideas, not emphasising ‘caste passing’ but examining caste concealment in the stream of passing literature to understand the human condition of one another. The third aim of the volume is to bridge the gap between literary studies and social sciences in general and Dalit literature and caste, untouchability studies in particular. By bridging the gap both the disciplines can enrich and energize each other by dwelling into the lived experiences and social conditions of the depressed masses bringing into light an empirical mooring of social sciences. The book touches on three major themes, ‘identitarian performance’, ‘distribution of fear’ and ‘unmarked identity’. With the deployment of these thematic categories, this book explores the narratives of “protective concealment” (p. 4) of the self against the “protected ignorance” (Alone, 2017) of the self of the dominant castes. The book explores the stigma and spectre of violence of caste and the ways in which it is attached to the social conditioning of the mindset of both the tormentor and the tormented. Thereby, it becomes important to understand the terrain on which Dalit writing is established, the lived realities of caste and everyday resistance. This volume focuses on reading and analysing Dalit short stories and autobiographical writing. The names of the narratives divided into the two sections below are only mentioned to showcase the thematic difference in the ways in which this volume refers to them, but one can also read these texts differently beyond the suggested themes.

Performance of Dalit Selfhood, Exchanging Unmarked Identities

The quote mentioned in the beginning is from Surajpal Chauhan’s short story “Raw Deal.” It is a symbolic illustration of caste—the ghost of the murdered Brahmin. It reflects the way caste is enforced invisibly in the hierarchical everyday social structure we live in. The narratives in this volume talk about auto-ethnographic sociological and anthropological hierarchical experiences of caste that draw critical attention towards the past and present caste portrayal. The caste acts and performs differently by maintaining the sociological positioning of a person. K. Satyanarayana and Joel Lee write, “Brahminhood is an act, Kshatriya-ness a runaway show; Dalit characters who successfully simulate these and other savarna statuses are careful observers and accomplished performers” (p. 16). In a general manner, we learn about caste experiences and fight against a hydra-headed monster called caste through Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit activists, writers, and intellectuals follow his legacy to tell the stories of caste and their struggle against social discrimination and the ways in which it is performed

on an everyday basis. Relating the Dalit performance with the self, Anupama Rao, in her essay “Representing Dalit Selfhood” (2006), writes the Dalit self was performed as an artefact and, at the same time, was continuously created and destroyed. However, we do not have the same access to Ambedkar’s interiority. This is not to say that Ambedkar did not write or address people about his experiences of dehumanisation and the severity of caste-based Hindu practices. Nonetheless, a collective self that is denied social recognition—a Dalit self that speaks of alienation from the nation that emerges as the basis of literary expression. For Dalit short-story writers and authors of the respective autobiographies, Ambedkar’s autobiographical text, his fight against the caste becomes a prime example to resist systemic exploitation.

Baburao Bagul’s ‘When I Hid My Caste’ (1963), Ajay Navaria’s ‘New Custom’ and ‘Tattoo’ (2013), Omprakash Valmiki’s ‘Sandstorm’ (2000), Pratiba Jeyachandran’s ‘In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (1995), Jai Prakash Kardam’s ‘No Bar’ (2003), Bhimarao Ramji Ambedkar’s ‘Waiting for a Visa’, Jai Prakash Kardam’s ‘My Caste’ (1997), Yashica Dutt’s *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) and, Urmila Pawar’s *Weave of My Life* (2003)—all of these mentioned narratives oscillate between the performance of the Dalit self and un/ marked identities. They creatively express the revolt against the structural violence of caste and untouchability by inhabiting the unpermitted terrain of dominant social space by concealing caste.

Spectre of Caste and the Distribution of Fear

In this caste-rigid, violent Indian society, one who belongs to a downtrodden community conceals caste because of the fear of identification that is distributed and engrained through the stigma and everyday dehumanisation of the Dalit body. All the narratives mentioned below not only talk about the fear of the spectre of caste but also expose the casteism and pervasiveness of caste contempt. The narratives which deal with the fear of caste are as follows: Omprakash Valmiki’s short story ‘Dread’ (2000) and his autobiographical writing *Joothan* (1993), Kausalya Baisantry’s autobiographical writing *Doubly Cursed* (1999), Manoranjan Byapari’s *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2017), Shailaja Paik’s *The Flood* (2017), M.M. Vinodini, ‘The Parable of the Lost Daughter: Luke 15:11-32’ (2008), Surajpal Chauhan’s ‘Raw Deal’ (1999), Sharankumar Limbale’s ‘Friend of the Family’ (1984) and, C. Ayyappan’s ‘Madness’ (2008). The presented narratives are not fictional narratives, but they are descriptions of the realism in literary expression to show the prescription of caste the way it is written and performed that generates fear among the marginalised communities. These narratives are not an individual account of suffering and resistance, but they are the collective voice of the self.

¹This text was written in 1935-36 and first published as a booklet by the People’s Education Society in 1990. In 1993 it was included in Volume 12 of *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* published by the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra.

Conclusion

It seems that the selection of the narratives in this volume is still mainstream drawn from the marginalised either because of the popularity of author's name or because of their written account in the form of a short stories or autobiographical writings. Many of these regional narratives are already available in the English language. There is enormous untranslated literary work of art in regional spaces, recognising and engaging with these works by bringing them into mainstream academic discourse is important. It is noteworthy that the present volume accomplishes the commitment of making Dalit literary expressions visible and accessible worldwide through its new perspective. Although the volume comparatively differentiates between caste concealment and racial passing in context to caste and race; however, it has always been the case to seek ally-ship in social movements and the dominant academic space of South Asia. How much it helps to eradicate caste at the local level remains an unresolved quest. The anthology is a significant intervention in the discussion on critical caste studies as it showcases seminal moments of past and present in Dalit writing. The book presents critically acclaimed writing produced locally and globally in the decades of resistance powerfully projected through literary expressions. It would have been a more concrete text for the field of critical caste studies if the book also would have incorporated comparative theoretical/analytical traditions of Dalits and the Blacks. Nonetheless, the book is an important addition to the anti-caste intellectual tradition to understand the lived realities of caste discrimination, the stigma and humiliation.

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