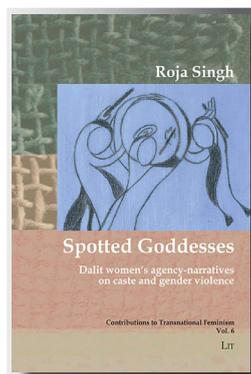


Spotted Goddesses: Dalit Women's Agency-narratives on Caste and Gender Violence

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Publisher: LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien,
Zurich (2018), and Zubaan, Delhi (2019)



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How does one write about a social institution and social relation that is constituted by violence, but one that has become normalized in society such that the violence is viewed only in its dramatic expressions as an ‘atrocious’, an abnormality, an exception to its existence? How does one write about a social phenomenon whose end one wishes to see? How does one write about domination without making the victims into mute objects or free subjects? How does one write with a verve and tenor that conveys the urgency of a world desperately seeking change, while acknowledging the need to submit to analysis? Such questions demand writing that foregrounds accountability (who are our accounts of reality really for?) and perspectivism (from what location do we as writers speak?).

Jebaroja Suganthi-Singh’s book, *Spotted Goddess: Dalit Women’s Agency Narratives on Caste and Gender Violence* deftly places such questions in the mind of a reader, by making them think about how caste, the institution and phenomenon in question above, would appear through the experiences of say, Chitra, a Dalit woman born into historically constructed conditions and identities of caste, gender, sexuality, class and religion that put her to work from the age of five in stone quarries owned by terrorizing caste groups self-aware of their own command over the social distribution of wealth, power, and status. Or, of Rani, a Dalit mother whose questioning of a patently unjust practice of ‘two-tumblers’ (a cultural practice of segregating and stigmatizing Dalits at roadside tea-stalls by

forcing them to drink in a separate cup from all others) resulted in a caste grudge being nurtured by caste communities over twelve years and the subsequent abduction, rape, and torture of her daughter Vijaya. Or, of Kalai, a feisty and fiery Dalit feminist leader whose everyday battles (for others and her own self) against caste, patriarchy, and class domination are exhaustive but who knows that any flagging of the spirits would be detrimental to her entire community.

The book brings together an array of stories about how caste kills sociality, the spirit to live and commune, humanity in humans, and imagination in the young. It is simultaneously about the indomitable and indefatigable spirit and energies of justice-seekers resisting caste and demanding dignity. Choosing to *not* occupy a general Archimedean point when narrating or accounting for caste, the author instead speaks from particular locations, the spaces occupied by Dalit women in the Chengalpattu, Pudukkottai, and Puduppatti regions of Tamil Nadu, India. She throws her lot with Fanon's 'wretched of the earth'—the ones who clean (y)our toilets, the ones whose calloused and chafed hands speak a history and bear a burden for all of us, the ones whose bodies are made grist for the purificatory kilns of caste, the ones whose imagination and dreams need to be crushed so that (y)our sons and daughters can have the dignity of education, residence, and livelihood. In its insistence on invoking a *humanness* in the very spaces that are designed to obliterate and extinguish it, the book raises questions about what it means to be human.

But the book does this, *not* from the heights of a (now dead and buried) humanist subject—a knowing autonomous subject yet unaware of its own hubris and conditions of its own possibilities—but from the depths of an ordinary and intellectually honest subject muddling through and mulling over a life that appears unfathomable in its brutality and injustice. As the author puts it, “enraged by these atrocities, and my own ignorance, but at the same time...deeply muddled in my inability to act immediately” (13). This book is then neither straightforward ethnography nor airy theoretical treatise. It has gripping ethnographic moments, captures subjects ‘speaking’, sets up the background and historical context, is reflexive about the power relations and interstices within which the authorial self interweaves ‘speaking subjects’, insists on the distinctive nature of Dalit women’s experience without essentializing, probes and collects narratives of expression of experience and longing in the midst of brutalization, advances theoretical concepts to account for reality, and takes on the mantle of activism unashamedly as an intellectual form of accountability. It is rich and demanding of the reader.

The book’s aim is to bring attention to the voices of Dalit women, especially Dalit women leaders—“desirous voices in change-seeking and change-making” (14) who bring to light the ordinary narratives of Dalit women’s “suffering, punishment, and change-making-rebellion” (15). Lest the reader suspect the book of simply ‘giving voice’ or letting the subaltern speak in ways that make the interpreter innocent (what Spivak has called, the “ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern”, 1999: 254), the book is not in that mold either. Its subjects are crafted by the author—not simply assumed as knowing subjects. Thus, Dalits are not essentialized but viewed as heterogenous and inevitably intersected by class and gender within community, and stories of ‘subalterns’ are framed on a stage and proscenium that are consciously erected by the author. Consequently, the (mimetic) *re*-presentation of reality occurs without a disavowal by the author who dons the mantle of (political) representative in writing this book. Indeed, the book intends to, and succeeds, in “inserting the subaltern into

the long road to hegemony” (Spivak, 310)—a result of the author’s long and persistent engagement with ‘transnational feminism’ (the book is itself part of a series by that name) without making “missionary claims” (about ‘saving’ the subaltern). If the non-rhetorical Spivakian question is “Can the hegemonic ear hear” (Barret, 2004), then the question has two referents: the subaltern testimonies in the book, and the book itself as a testimony. The above attempt to locate the book within an intellectual milieu dominated by the faultlines of the politics of knowledge becomes necessary due to the possibilities that this book may itself be silenced within academia by dismissing it as an activist’s platform.

The book makes two explicit arguments—that caste needs to be viewed as a system of violence-punishment, and that Dalit women are agentive subjects operating on and through the ‘difference’ that constitutes them as untouchable subjects. Despite the book’s subtitle, the reader comes away with a view that it would be wrong to simply think about ‘caste violence’ as if it is an effect of an institution. Rather, the book makes a strong case for viewing *caste as violence* and provokes us to think about why speaking about ‘caste violence’ (or the violence of caste) begs the question of whether there is anything *but* violence in, of, for, and about caste. Viewing violence as the *raison d’être* of caste is powerful in that it problematizes the variety of functions served by caste that are regularly valorized—caste as identity, belonging and community. Consequently, the agency of Dalit women (the second argument above) is available only through their negotiations of this violence. It is here that the author brings into relief the way that caste as violence produces, distributes, organizes, and consumes ‘difference’ in its construction of casted and (out)casted, and gendered and sexualized subjects. Here, the author characterizes Dalit women’s agency as ‘earthy humanness’—a Dalit ethic of care that is unconditional, based on identification with others as a mode of claiming humanity, dignity and justice for all, and grounded in lived experiences of Dalit women characterized by the restlessness for change, subversion, transgression, and protest (19). Reminiscent of Ambedkar’s concept of *manuski*, earthy humanness also resonates with more recent works such as that of Shailaja Paik who speaks of a Dalit “womanist-humanist complex” (2021a: 127) and shows the multiple elements of *manuski* (2021a:129–30), and that of Nate Roberts (2016) whose work on Dalit religions in slums in Tamil Nadu brings into relief the notion of “to be cared for” as a way of provisioning the constitutive lack in caste—i.e. caring for others. The book additionally makes one argument in passing (how do religious symbols shape anti-caste praxis—a point I explore later in this review), and one methodological intervention (how to view Dalit subjects as interlocked in forms of oppression and exploitation and intersected by class-caste-gender-religion—a point I pick up below).

An implicit third argument in the book is that caste cannot be viewed outside of its dependence on patriarchy and sexual domination. This argument is self-evident in every part of the book—and therefore needs articulation. It is congruent with other scholars who have long conceptualized the deep roots of ‘caste-patriarchy’ (Omvedt, 1986), ‘caste-patriarchal bargain’ (Chakravarti, 1998), and most recently as ‘sex-gender-caste complex’ (Paik, 2021b). The book provokes us to think about how sexuality—in this case the masculinity of dominant caste men which *privately* wields power over dominant caste women—depends upon the *public* and routine humiliation and emasculation of Dalit men, and public shaming and hence subservience of Dalit women whose sexuality is sought to be domesticated/controlled due to its purported

lack of ‘culture’ or ‘civility’ even while being the object of desire of caste subjects. The characters in this book demonstrate how caste boundaries are routinely and emblematically inscribed (as punishment and reward) on the bodies of men and women who transgress them.

Viewing *caste as violence* and *as caste-patriarchy* allows us to further note that caste-patriarchy manifests itself in brutal and banal ways, an optic of power that is hinted at by the author’s explorations of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of Dalit women. We tend to ‘see’ or ‘hear’ about caste-patriarchy only when the brutality is no longer possible to deny; when violence erupts publicly—in the form of what is known ‘caste atrocity’—an unfortunate term since it makes caste as violence appear exceptional as if everyday life under caste-patriarchy is not already atrocious. Nonetheless, caste-patriarchy is also banal, operating silently and invisibly in our everyday lives, as a ‘normal’ structuring force—part of our ‘traditions’, institutions and practices such as patrilineality, arranged marriage, ‘traditional’ family roles, and purity/pollution rituals. We can never understand the brutality of caste patriarchy without understanding the banality of its violence. For, it is the banal that grants ‘impunity’ to caste-patriarchy by framing transgressions of caste order as a ‘threat to the social order’ and therefore demanding the ‘reiteration of difference within hierarchy of power’ (Geetha, 2016:286). We see this ‘impunity’ at work in the regularity of the banal violence of caste-patriarchy—when Dalits sport moustaches, appear well-groomed, dare to ride a horse as grooms, appear in public wearing ‘good’ or modern clothing, neatly comb their hair, seek or even excel in modern education—all because these are viewed as the entitled cultural and *ritual* markers of dominant castes. The banal leads to the brutal, in an eerie confirmation of Freud’s ‘narcissim of small difference’, wherein a minor difference holds the key as a trigger for a violent attack (1930).

The book begins with a brief prologue that introduces caste and Untouchability to a lay audience and quickly establishes the strong presence of ‘Dalit women’ as historical subjects formed in the crucible of caste-patriarchy. We are also given a glimpse into the author’s journey of growing up in India and current location as a scholar-activist in the USA, and the various actors, institutions and historical moments that shaped her own sense of identity. The literateur emerges when the author speaks of the oral histories of Dalit women in this book as “splatter narratives [rising from within a mortar] dodging a pounding pestle” (12). The metaphors are haunting since the rest of the book gives glimpses into the mortar (i.e. caste-patriarchy as a system) that breaks Dalits, and the pestle (i.e. violence including punishment) in the hands of the pounders who use it in the normal unfolding of their everyday lives.

The introductory chapter centers the author’s ‘restlessness for change’—a feature that also characterizes the main inspirations for and protagonists of the book—Kalaimagal Arumugam (or Kalai) and Rani Periasamy. The author pithily identifies the centrality of ‘difference’ to caste and untouchability thus: “difference is the identification of the one to be violated” (42). ‘Difference’ becomes an anchor that allows the author to lay out her theoretical apparatus for shaping the narratives in the book. This is in the footsteps of a long line of scholars from Guru (1995) to Rege (1998) to Paik (2021a)—all of whom usefully explore the ‘difference’ of Dalit women. The author underscores the limits of the label ‘feminism’ as used in the Indian context where the existential reality of caste communities differs fundamentally from those of Dalit communities. As an alternative canvas, drawing upon the fine-grained work of Swarr and Nagar (2010), she looks toward ‘transnational feminism’ since it

is constituted by both intersectionality and difference (born of the dialogues between white urban middle-class feminists and Black, Native, and Chicana Others, and the postcolonial selves across the international division of labor and histories). This allows the author to speak of the need for a constant, vigilant and “thoughtful bonding across borders” (especially the borders of nation, culture, ethnic, other identities, 30). The chapter forcefully advances the author’s view of “difference as a verb” that enables a “praxis of ‘difference’ as a positively subversive act that Dalit women live into [sic] as a way of life—a spontaneous cultural practice affirming Dalit female identity” (38).

The next three chapters provide the background context for the substantive and ethnographic chapters that follow). Chapter one brings into relief a much-effaced fact—that Dalit women are at the forefront of Dalit struggles in very concrete and impactful ways—be it in the form of writing resistance poetry or other forms of expression such as songs, dance, theater, and social protest, building organizations across India for Dalits, and working as community organizers, trainers, lawyers, and union leaders. We learn that the subject position of being a Dalit woman is simultaneously “visible and invisible, touchable and untouchable, undesirable and sexually available” (60), and this enables, nay, requires them to work pragmatically and innovatively through “trans-cultural, trans-national, and trans-authoritative” practices, and frequently with allies—Dalit men for sure, but also men and women from caste communities—a theme that recurs in the book since it is critical for Kalai’s work.

Having established the historical centrality of Dalit women in making the present, chapter two cuts a short path through the forest of caste theory. Skirting the bulk of theorizations about caste from sociology, anthropology, and history, it takes one strand from Dumont—the ideology of purity and pollution—as a “strong ground” for caste (61). This is not without value despite the several critiques of Dumont especially that his account of caste falsely subordinates power or politics to status and ideology (Barnett et al., 1976). The author instead clearly shows the complementarity of power and ideology by underscoring the political character of caste as (ideologically) constructing Dalits as stigmatized, ‘dirty’, and as essentially polluted, and hence permanently pathologized as Other. The chapter also explores, albeit in a not so productive way, the ‘racial’ basis of caste and the Dravidian/Aryan distinctions—a view that is at odds with the scholarly consensus on rejecting racial theories of caste (Chairez, 2018; Kumar, 2016). The concluding part of the chapter locates Christianity as an alternative for Dalits under colonial and postcolonial conditions, the need to view dignity as a need especially for dehumanized populations, and the ways that the rise of Hindutva makes conversion into the greatest transgression and hence deserving of punishment. Given the earlier section, the reader could be reminded of the historical documentation of how the Christian views of Robert Caldwell, Monier Williams, as also William Jones converged with their need to have a racial theory of both, caste and south Indians (Dirks, 2001).

The next chapter builds upon the ideological basis of caste (purity/pollution) to ground caste practices in texts. Here the key idea is that the ideological domination of caste depends on the holding of ideological texts as ‘sacred’ (or at least as incontrovertible) and hence the meting out of punishment in social life in accordance with the characters of iconic stories within the texts. The chapter therefore explores the *Manusmriti* (a text made iconic by Ambedkar), and the stories of Soorpanaka in the *Ramayana*, and Hidimba in the *Mahabharatha*. It shows, with some force, the ways that certain populations are stigmatized as ‘different’ and hence as marked bodies

for punishment, reviling, mockery, exclusion, and exploitation (including sexual). While the author is right about treating ‘myth as archetype’, having a relation to social relations (98–99), such a translation from text to social relations needs to be viewed as far from simple reflection. People do not simply imitate text. Rather, texts, stories and characters are constructed as cultural models learned in the thick of social life, and become key shapers of human actions, especially making actions durable and patterned over time, or what social scientists now call ‘practices’ (Schatzki et al., 2001). People learn schemas of ‘right’ behavior, ‘right’ relations in their cultural repertoire (culture as well as mind), and these change or get reinforced continually through experience and participation in rituals of community belonging—the site for identity formation. That is what makes caste into a dynamic phenomenon, showing continuity with change over time across modes of political economic changes. It helps us explain how (and why) caste persists even when its hierarchies are produced and reproduced within specific contexts rather than being fixed and timeless reproductions.

Here, we finally get a glimpse of Mariamman, the Spotted Goddess, who operates as an icon and an index for Dalits, especially Dalit women. As the author powerfully points out, “Dalit spirituality is not about striving to run beyond this world of dilemmas but about making the dilemma of life an experiential reality to be embraced” (105). Dalit women then actually *identify with* Mariamman (hence as *icon*)—a goddess who has fallen from an exalted status and grace, been cursed by dominant actors, bears marks on her body as an ‘outcasted’ being. The social being of Dalit resembles the marginalized and stigmatized one in the realm of the gods. Further, the ambiguous state and status of Mariamman—as one inflicted by disease and yet prayed to as a healer of disease, a self who is suffering and yet one who is capable of liberating—is an *index* of the lived experience of Dalits who have to reach deep into their own selves to operate on the ideologically produced ‘difference’ that is the root of their socially imposed oppression. The author’s narrative about Mariamman also converges here with the recent arguments that ‘Dalit religion’ (or ‘slum religion’) transcends Hindu and Christian affiliations and is characterized by a moral universalism and pragmatic orientation to this-worldly problems (Roberts, 2016; see also Roberts, 2019).

The next four chapters (4–7) form the ethnographic core of the book. It is here that we see how Kalai and Rani and the scores of other Dalit women who resist caste, patriarchy, and class exploitation in Pudokkottai district, personify Mariamman. As the author observes, they are the spotted goddesses—suffering and healing in their liberatory struggles (164). We learn here about the organizations, Dr. Ambedkar Women And children Regeneration and Development program (or DA) and *Thai* (Tamil for mother) which is a residential program for Dalit girls founded by Kalai (and where Rani works as a key staff member). DA has been working for decades on everyday and institutionalized forms of casteism. These include responding to rapes, threats, kidnapping, maiming and killing of Dalits, and destruction of the meagre property possessed by Dalits on an almost daily basis; seeking formal residency rights for Dalit communities living in precarity; seeking to eradicate manual scavenging (a bonded labor practice wherein Dalit women from particular castes are condemned to clean the dry toilets of caste communities and physically dispose the feces); fighting for the right of Dalits to bury their dead in a dignified manner; protesting to end the entrenched and debilitating impacts of illicit liquor brewing within Dalit communities, a business that is a nexus of local politicians, religious leaders, and the underground economic overlords with the connivance of the police; seeking wages for ritually unpaid work

(such as beating the *dappu*); and fighting to eradicate long-standing cultural rituals that degrade Dalits especially Dalit women (such as the ritual of forcing newly-wed Dalit women to sleep first with a dominant caste man on their wedding night).

Notably, DA operates with the assistance of individuals from across the caste and religious spectrum (138) largely due to the incredible foresight and relational skills of Kalai who has built long-lasting relations with people who can use their power to resist caste in its local operations. Thus, the women of DA are engaged in activities as varied as writing petitions, learning to demand the filing of FIRs (first information reports of crimes against Dalits at police stations, frequently the most critical site for ensuring any modicum of justice within the law), staging protests and 'sit-ins' to running retraining programs in tailoring, bag-making and other skills for those rescued from manual scavenging, building *sangams* or local collectives of self-help groups, helping Dalit families to apply for and acquire the ration cards that helped with food insecurity, and running local schools and hostels for girls. The rich documentation of the life work of Kalai and Rani and others is captured by the author as a "demand" by "restless leaders" for "a real human life of dignity" (158). Kalai and Rani appear here as 'fierce'—a subversive reappropriation of being caste as Untouchable (166), one unafraid to risk everything (as Rani put it, one with *thunichal* or 'daring courage', 171).

Chapter seven invites the reader to consider how widespread this restlessness for change is. It documents the various oral traditions especially songs and poetry from Chengalpettu district, in which the 'spontaneous activism' of Dalit women shaped by their earthy humanness comes alive with meaning, poignancy but also always celebrating Dalit female identity even while reminding the singers and listeners about the oppressive conditions and precarity of their social being. One such song is a 'coming of age' for a Dalit girl. The author reflexively notes how the dialogue within the song between the mother and her young daughter simultaneously celebrates the beauty of the girl even while warning of the lurking dangers of caste punishment for being presumptuous about Dalit beauty (197). It also underscores the existential stress, anxieties, and real worries for the safety of all Dalits in a society that takes away their right to dignity and self-worth. Many of these songs are also social inversions and transgressions in which Dalit women perform acts that they are normally excluded from in caste society, and in this sense are indictments of social reality. The frequent use of metaphors and fantastic features (e.g. Dalit women with multiple eyes) are also noted by the author as ways of subverting the negative stereotypes of Dalits, proclaiming the power of inner strength, a "transcendence of the victimized and exploited bodies of the singers". And yet, the author wonders at the end how meanings of such songs are enunciated, and the inscrutability of such moments of self-fashioning.

The penultimate chapter, on the writings of Bama, one of the best writers on caste and patriarchy in Tamil, bring us back to the early arguments of the author—that the structure called caste is held in place by, among other things, the text and the code which forms the language context within which caste actors play out casted roles. Bama's writings are one of the most searing critiques of caste that produce deep insights into the hold of caste on social life but also point to the ubiquitous existence of rebellions, transgressions and subversions of caste by Dalits. The chapter is based on the author's reading of two of Bama's novels—*Sangati* (1994) and *Karukku* (1992) and an oral interview with the writer. The value of Bama's writings is that she is able to not only locate Dalit women as speaking subjects within a matrix of intersecting oppressive

forces of gender, caste, class and even religion (both Hinduism and Christianity), but shows how the codes of caste are regularly invoked and (re)inscribed as authoritative vehicles for norms such as songs, proverbs, exemplars (even legendary ones) each of which exercises authority over Dalit women and men. The story of Mariamma which the author explores in some depth, especially brings out the sexual politics of caste—masculinity, femininity, violence, ‘selective visibility’ of Dalit women and their bodies, normalization of oppression, and the reproduction of community (i.e. caste) boundaries and caste domination. The interview with Bama seamlessly leads to the concluding chapter where the author shares her personal journey which includes her own coming to consciousness of her casted identity, and a brief tracing of the moments of conversion to Christianity in her ancestral history. Again, we see the trepidations and normalcy of the visibility /invisibility binary with regards caste, and the care, efforts, and courage needed to come to caste consciousness as a Dalit woman.

This book fulfils a historical role. It responds to the call of our times for viewing and making space for Dalits to be leaders. It does this by showing how Dalit women have been leading the struggle against caste for a long while and speaking to the non-hegemonic ear about what is needed to annihilate caste. Their earthy humanness or unconditional ethic of care strikes at the root of caste’s uncaring and hence deeply anti-social character. The book is also a useful foil against the twin temptations of caste as identitarian politics and caste blindness. It demonstrates how leaders such as Kalai and Rani forge links with allies while foregrounding Dalit women’s experience, and consequently craft an inclusive caste-conscious anti-caste political community. Dalit politics, this book attests, is always an anti-caste politics and Dalit identity is an anti-caste identity. In this sense it validates the view that “castes cannot be annihilated by Dalits alone” but requires the active participation of all castes, especially privileged castes (Teltumbde, 2005:213).

Finally, I find the complex figure of Mariamma useful for negotiating the links between caste as a historical, material and symbolic social formation on the one hand, and the particular ideological formations we call ‘religion’ (Christianity, Hinduism in this case) on the other. The infructuous debates over the Hindu character of caste are in need of updating. To the author’s insight that caste is a “culturally rooted social stratification patented through religion” (22), one is prompted to recall two other insights from scholarship. The first is that this ‘patent’ (with religion) has considerably weakened if not expired; see for example Sheth (1999) on the secularization of caste, and Mosse (2012) on how Christianity can be viewed as ‘descaralizing caste’ or ‘denaturalizing inequality’ rather than upending caste. The second is that the secularization of caste does not preclude the continued ritualization of caste; here the classic work views caste as the emblematic “organization for ritual” in India and closely tied to ‘kingship’ and its legitimation (see Hocart, 1950). As noted earlier, the politics of small and ritualized difference triggers caste-patriarchal violence and its punishment (far more than in class violence) and this is due to the fact that a primary function of caste is to maintain a social order that ensures social reproduction of caste monopolies. Consequently, it is (secular) ‘culture’ today which is the chief ‘camouflage for caste’ in modern and multicultural India, legitimating ‘difference’ to serve the need for the mixophobic character of caste and enable the continued monopolization of wealth, power, and status (Natrajan, 2012).

When invoked by Dalits, Mariamma enables fierce fighters even as she is herself feared (and ‘set apart’ in the apartheid of caste), liberates the casted self even as she

is herself inflicted by caste the disease, inhabits the same space/spectrum as the caste Hindu amman/devi even while challenging the root of Hindu sociality, and revitalizes Dalit energies even when she is casted as enervating. It is a case of the “Master’s tools” being turned against the Master to rattle the house of caste, even though it may be limited as Audre Lorde (1983) cautions. To rework the words of Marx and Ambedkar, the spotted goddesses such as Kalai and Rani in their life work, speech and actions are indeed signifiers of the ‘soul of soulless conditions’, the ‘heart of a heartless world’ and the ‘sigh of the oppressed’, and their religion, far from dulling their senses, makes them the rising phoenix capable of annihilating caste.

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