

Abstract

This dissertation is an attempt to understand how representation and lived experience(s) of the Dalits go hand in hand, but while one becomes visible, the other remains invisible. In other words, they are conjunctural in their relations. This study analyses the rich array of carefully selected texts that include, Graphic Narratives—*Bhimayana: Experience of Untouchability* (2011), and *Gardener in the Wasteland* *Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2011); Dalitbahujan media portals –*Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age, Dalit Camera, Velivada.Com*; Hindi Cinema – *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959), and *Aarakshan* (2011); and Dalit life writing – *Baluta* (1978), and *Angaliyat (The Stepchild)*, 1986). Through the Dalit “standpoint”, the study interrogates how meaning, language, events and “critical narratives” produce casteless understandings and anti-caste analytical perspectives.

The study revolves around the new forms of institutionalized hierarchies that have emerged in the post-Ambedkar context through oppositions between Dalithood and Dalitness, power and authenticity, casteless (ness) and anti-caste(ness). Further, it tries to develop the connections with past and present Dalit resistance movements through the analysis of aforementioned texts. The study critically analyzes two broad articulations, *narratives about the Dalits* and *writings by the Dalits*. For analytical and methodological purposes this dissertation separates *the narrative* (narratives about caste and casteless relations) as a mainstream representation of Dalit suffering and *the writings* (Dalit self- expressions about anti-casteness) as voices of the Dalits that draws on the lived realities through their own words and imagination. In order to understand the above mentioned processes and the context, this study is developed through Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's (2012 and 2019) theoretical debates on the everyday lived realities of the Dalits and caste as discussed in the discipline of

social sciences and humanities. In addition, it also engages with Stuart Hall's (1997) and bell hooks's (1992/2015) approach on representation to uncover and re-articulate the cultural worldviews about the Dalits.

The study makes two main arguments. First, the study argues that the distinction between the lived experience(s) and representation is much more than the mere difference between the insiders' and outsider view. Dalithood and Dalitness can be understood through a prism of casteless(ness) and anticaste(ness) in which casteless(ness) is a position available for upper castes while anticaste(ness) is rooted in the Dalit resistance. The mainstream representational narration of Dalithood and social oppression is marked by a naturalization of victimhood that does not provide the Dalit view of lived experience(s) in an emancipatory manner. But on the other hand, writings by the Dalit scholars develops through Dalitness, with a focus not only on subjugation and humiliation, but also on the assertion for self-respect and dignity. These aspects of self-respect and dignity become radical in their articulation, and anger in their language comes through the lived reality of the "epistemic violence".

Secondly, the study also argues for an intersection of Dalit studies and Cultural studies in order to challenge the brahmanical cultural knowledge production. This intersection can extend the program begun by Dalit studies to reclaim power and knowledge in relation with the 'politics of difference' in the cultural realm. This can be done through the ways in which the Dalit aesthetics decenter the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives. Further, it can also attempt to de-brahmanize and de-casteize the established disciplinary space by bringing a discourse of Dalit experience of caste and humiliation into mainstream academia.

Taking a cue from Guru and Sarukkai this dissertation expands on their subtexts of anger and *maitri* and attempts to foreground the Dalit anguish to show

that the Dalit anguish is grounded in the ‘lived’ experiences of Brahminical society and its graded inequalities. Dalit anguish is a revolt filled with resentment directed not against any particular being but the undemocratic structure of the society. The Dalit anguish is produced through literature, protest movements, artistic expressions and so on. The dissertation suggests that the Dalit anger/anguish has an ability to uplift the burden of caste. Further, it also leads to the formation of *maitri* (love and compassion towards any being) among the “everyday different social”. Thus, this anguish generates an “ethical rationality” that opens up the possibility of having democratic conversations among caste communities who occupy highly diverse social positions.

Considering the developments in the field of Dalit Studies in the past few decades, the study concludes by making a case for *Dalit Cultural Studies* which has the potential to transform the discipline into a dynamic field of research.