



Caste And Oppression: Voices From The Margins In The Indian Literature

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Abstract:

Indian society has been shaped for centuries by the caste system, which divides people into different social groups and their status in the society. With this, they also controlled access to basic rights such as water, education, respect, and justice. Especially the Dalits, who have faced continuous discrimination, violence, and humiliation. This study examines the representation of caste oppression in Indian literature and gives voice to marginalized communities. For writers like Munshi Premchand and Omprakash Valmiki, short stories have become their way to show the harsh realities of caste oppression and social inequality. The study also addresses the gap between literature and social reality. It does not read stories as a fictional texts but reads them as reflection of real caste-based discrimination that exists in Indian society. It highlights how voices from the margins represent lived realities rather than fictional narratives.

Key words: Caste, Dalit literature, social oppression, marginalized voices, identity

Introduction

What happens when a person is judged before they speak? How does it feel to be denied water? How does it feel to be addressed by something you may not like? These questions are lived experiences and realities for millions of people in India. The caste system decides who a person is, what they will do, where they will live and how other people will treat them. The caste system divides people in society. These are the situations one cannot choose. It is an accident from birth and continues for life. Caste is not just a category; it decides who is powerful and who is not. It divides people into two categories: on top, there are upper-caste people, who get access to education, land, and money. Whereas other people at the bottom, there are castes who are treated as “impure” or “untouchables” also addressed as Dalits, who have faced discrimination and oppression for their entire life.

According to Hindu society, people were divided into four groups called Varnas¹. Outside these four groups were the Dalits. Upper caste people forced them to do work like cleaning toilets or removing animal skin, which other people did not even touch. Society treats them as “untouchables” or “polluting”, so upper-caste people would not sit with or eat with them or even touch them. Whereas Dalit children were not allowed to enter schools, they could not enter temples, and Dalit families were not allowed to take water from public wells.

¹ Varna is the traditional social classification in Hindu society divided into four parts based on their ritual status - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, with Dalits historically excluded from this system.

Caste is not a minor social issue that prevents true social progress. It has been argued that society cannot become modern if the caste system exists. Caste is something which traps people from birth to death. Ambedkar himself faced oppression and inequality throughout his life, even though he was educated. His works are not only books or theories but real lived experience he shares in his works. This highlights how he suffered from humiliation throughout his life. Such experiences reveal that caste is not natural; it is man-made, it is created by society, and is your destiny in which family you are born. This is something you cannot leave, and society forces you to accept your lower positionⁱ.

No progress can be made until the caste system is destroyed completely. The idea of *annihilation* itself means complete destruction; no slow progress, but complete change, which means no slow change can stop humiliation from upper caste people to lower caste people; it has to be destroyed. Earlier reform efforts often focused only on modifying individual behaviour, like treating the lowly born with love or allowing them to enter the places of worship. But these are all superficial changes that will not benefit the lives of the Dalits with dignity and respect. Therefore, focusing on root causes, such as allowing the members of different castes to eat together and allowing inter-caste marriages. Issues like these can impact society, and caste slowly becomes meaningless (Ambedkar).

Caste discrimination in India is not only about upper caste people insulting lower class but they also get denied to basic needs like water. In some region caste rules were so strong that they decided who could take water from public wells and tanks. Dalits or untouchables were called pollutants, so they were not allowed to take water from public wells. In some cases, Dalits had to travel long distances to only fetch water, this shows how basic needs of human beings are based on their caste. Access to natural resources, which should ideally be available to all, was transformed into a means of social exclusion. Water, though natural resource, become controlled by dominant groups, turning it into a tool of power and humiliation. Tanks, wells, and ponds were built for the community people but later controlled by certain castes. Even in the post- independence, many Dalit's face water discrimination, which shows how modern development also cannot change people's minds. In many areas today, Dalits have separate hand-pumps, and when they try to use upper-caste taps, they get insulted. This shows that while designing these water supply systems in rural areas, governments also design social justice. Development alone is not enough; it must include equalityⁱⁱ.

Understanding Caste, Social Oppression, and Dalit Literature in India

Literary representations also play a crucial role in reflecting caste-based discrimination in everyday life. A well-known short story *Thakur ka kuan* is a powerful representation of poverty and the denial of basic human rights like water. Premchand not only shows the reality but also the struggle of Dalits in real life through the story. This story shows how caste systems differentiate people and do not allow for basic human needs. The story focuses on Gangi and her husband Jokhu from the lower caste who struggle to drink clean water even when such access can save their life. The story opens when Jokhu is thirsty and drinks water, which he denies because the water stinks, which shows they are forced to drink water that is contaminated (Premchand). This act shows how upper-class people treat the lower class in rural India; this water representation not just shows physical thirst but a denial for people who can drink clean water and who may suffer. Premchand shows a mirror to the readers through his stories because they are not imaginary stories but lived experiences of the writers themselves, which they show in their works.

Gangi the protagonist decides to bring water for her husband from a clean well which is of Thakur's, her husband stops her doing that because they were not allowed to do so. The well she wants to fetch water belongs to the Thakur, and its central conflict of the story. This conflict represents that it's risky to even touch Thakur's well because they were lower caste people. This shows how lower caste people live; they get beaten or punished for things like drinking water, which is a basic amenity for every human being. When she reaches the well, "the rope escapes from her hand," and the bucket falls into the water, which creates a sound, and Thakur's house door opensⁱⁱⁱ. This scene is so intense that she is seen running away in fear, which shows she failed at fetching water from Thakur's well. This portrayal shows how the caste system not only divides people into upper and lower castes but also creates fear in individuals of the lower caste if they do not listen to other people and obey their rules. The story represents Dalit's struggles for basic needs like water, and Gangi's failed attempt, which shows that she cannot fight back because she

does not have any power; this shows systemic denial of dignity and rights^{iv}. This story shows how upper-caste people control resources that are for everyone; this is not a personal story but a social commentary.

Another aspect of the story that is highlighted is the quiet suffering of the marginalised communities. Premchand does not show Gangi expressing her pain loudly and openly; she suffers in silence, which shows people from the lower caste suffer in silence, and no one takes a stand for them. In the end, when she sees Jokhu drinking the contaminated water even when he is not well, it shows that lower caste people have no choice but to listen to upper caste people. The story highlights the real struggles of lower caste people and how upper caste people take control of resources that are built for everyone. The story shows the real side of rural India, how lower caste people get oppressed by the upper caste.

Moreover, caste oppression intersects with gender. Dalit women often face discrimination due to their caste and gender. Women are seen as labour who can work tirelessly without any complaints. The suffering of women is ignored by the other people because they think it is their work to obey orders from everyone. The struggle of lower women shows they must carry double burdens and it affects them more deeply and more painfully than men. Caste has been the most influential thing shaping Indian society. Social oppression in India is deeply rooted in the caste system, which divides people into different groups. Dalits historically have been outside this system and have faced immense discrimination and humiliation. Their daily lives were marked by hatred and oppression; they were not allowed to even touch the tanks of upper caste people, not allowed to enter temples, and denied access to education.

Social oppression is not limited it also includes humiliation, insult and violence from upper caste people. Dalits were forced to live outside the village and do works which other people don't even touch. They were seen as "untouchables", even after independence caste-based discrimination still practices. *Article 15* a Hindi film that represents Article 15 of the *Indian Constitution*, which provides equal rights and abolishes discrimination based on caste, gender, or sex. The film shows how the constitution promises to provide equal rights to everyone but fails in real life. The story revolves around an IPS officer, Ayaan Ranjan, solving a case of three Dalit girls who go missing, and two of them are found hanging from a tree^v. The film shows how the case got delayed because the victims belong to the lower caste. This highlights the real side of the constitution because the same things happened in real life also. Cases of lower caste get ignored because they do not deserve justice and they cannot access the resources provided by the government itself. Ayaan slowly understands that caste still holds everything like who gets justice and whose voice matters. "*Article 15 kehta hai ki kisi ke sath jaat ke aadhar par bhedbhaav nahi ho sakta*"²this dialogue shows how Ayaan has belief in constitutional values; throughout the film he talks about equality. The dialogue represents modern thinking because Ayaan came to the village from the city and he did not see these types of discrimination in the city. The dialogue shows the gap between law and society. Equality only exists on paper, not in real life.

The dialogue exposes the reality of how justice lies in the constitution, not in real life. The dialogue "*Ladkiyan kaun si jaat ki thi*"³ shows that caste identity is more important than human life. Instead of asking what happened, society asks who they were. This shows humanity does not exist; the thing that matters is caste. This dialogue shows how victims get treated in a caste-obsessed society. The strongest message that the film gives is that institutions like the police often support caste discrimination rather than doing their duty. By the end of the film, Ayan understands that reading the constitution alone cannot help to change what people practice. Equality must be practised in real life. It shows the sad reality of the Indian constitution and brings down the reality to the cinema. And questions the failure of the constitution, and it gives a strong message to the viewers.

The policing of India is also shaped by the caste system rather than being equal with everyone. Although the Indian Constitution denies discrimination on the basis of caste, caste system continues to influence how institutions like the police act and behave in everyday life. This results in disrespect, humiliation and

² The dialogue is spoken by Ayaan in *Article 15 (2019)*. Translation: "*Article 15 says that no one can be discriminated against on the basis of caste*".

³ The dialogue is spoken by Ayaan in *Article 15 (2019)*. Translation: "*Which caste did the girls belong to?*"

delay with Dalit community people. The discussion of the film Article 15 shows how police may defend criminals and punish victims to defend powerful names^{vi}. This highlights how policing functions in India and points out unfinished cases of marginalised groups. Even though the Constitution demands justice and promises equality, the police fail to provide justice.

Omprakash Valmiki is an important Dalit writer who shows the reality of lived experience through his works. His short story *Amma* focuses on the everyday pain and humiliation that Dalit women face. Amma, the woman in the story, works very hard throughout her life, like domestic work, cleaning house and collecting firewood. Despite doing all the work without any complaints, she still gets treated with disrespect because she was a Dalit, a lower caste woman. Amma accepts all the disrespect thinking that it is a part of life, she cannot fight back because she does not have the power. Valmiki clearly describes that she is also forced to beg for leftover food from upper caste homes. This highlights the extreme poverty she must go through. She accepts the humiliation because she has no other choice left to feed her children. As a Dalit woman, she faces double oppression; her suffering remains unspoken and ignored. The leftover food shows that eating that is not their choice, it is because of poverty. Her silence represents how caste oppression takes voices from lower-caste people^{vii}.

Indian caste system can be understood as a structure that organizes society into different groups and determines how it functions^{viii}. People are divided into different groups and based on them they get treated, that means their caste will decide how others will behave. Caste also determines their work, whom they will marry and with whom they can eat. It is fixed at birth and cannot be changed. This shows that individuals are forced to live the life they want or not, they have no other choice. One important rule is that people can't marry into different castes, they have to marry in their own caste. It also reflects that lower and upper caste groups have historically been treated differently. Even though education and laws tried to reduce caste hierarchy, some people in India practice the caste system. This helps in understanding why the caste system exists and why lower caste people must face it for a longer time (Ghurye). It acts as a mirror which shows the reality of how lower caste people get treated.

Narrating Caste: Lived Experience and Literary Representation

Caste in India is not only a social system but also a lived reality of many that shapes everyday life in visible and invisible ways. It shows how people are treated, where they belong and what opportunities ones perceived and even how one is perceived as a human being. Literature becomes an important place where these realities are expressed, questioned, and understood. Literature is something which is not created separately from society, it's always influenced by the writer's lived experiences, background, and social position. In the context of caste, this becomes even more important because it shows how writers present ideas like oppression, identity, and resistance. How caste is portrayed in literature greatly depends on the writer, whether they write from lived experience or from an external, observational standpoint. This difference creates two different perspectives in Indian writing: Dalit and Non-Dalit representations of caste. The distinction between Dalit and non-Dalit writing is important in Indian literature, especially in understanding how caste realities are shown in different texts.

Non-Dalit writers have played a significant role in bringing caste related issues into mainstream literature. Through their works they often show sympathy towards marginalized communities and highlight social injustice. This helps to be aware of caste discrimination to many readers. These writers usually describe caste-related discrimination from an outsider's point of view. They observe the suffering of the Dalit from outside but never experience it themselves.

Rationality is often seen as neutral and objective, but in reality it depends on how it is used. When rational thinking is used to challenge injustice and remove ignorance, it becomes meaningful and ethical. However, when it is used to ignore or justify inequality, it becomes what is called "unrighteous rationality"^{ix}. In such cases, it may seem logical and progressive on the surface, but it does not fully question the deeper structures that sustain caste hierarchy. Moreover, the term "unrighteous rationality" means using logic in a way that supports or justifies injustices instead of challenging it. Rationality can be understood as something that changes depending on its purpose. When it aims to remove ignorance, it becomes meaningful and ethical. This can be especially seen in non-Dalit writing where caste is often seen as social issue, rather

than treating it as a lived reality. Such narratives may express sympathy towards marginalized communities and highlights injustice, but sometimes remain limited to surface-level critique. In this way, it creates an impression of questioning caste while leaving its core structures intact. This reflects what can be understood as “unrighteous rationality”, where reasoning appears critical but does not lead to structural change (Alone).

The idea of “protected ignorance” further explains this limitation. “Protected ignorance” refers to a condition where ignorance is not accidental but actively maintained within social and intellectual systems^x. The concept of “protected ignorance” helps to understand the limitations of non-Dalit representations of caste. This concept become important while analysing how caste is portrayed in literature, especially highlighting the difference between Dalit and non-Dalit writing. In several cases, non-Dalit narratives reflect this condition, as they engage with caste from an outsider’s perspective. Though it may seek to highlight caste as a social issue to be examined and analysed rather than as a lived and personal reality. This often leads to the neglect certain key dimensions of caste oppression, particularly those related to everyday experiences of emotional and psychological suffering. Such limitation arises because non-Dalit writing is influenced by the social position that remains part of the structures they aims to challenge. Even though this form of knowledge seem complete and objective, yet it can unintentionally ignore or neglect the nuanced experiences of marginalized communities. In this way “protected ignorance” functions through selective representation, where dominant viewpoints are strengthened and marginalized voices remain only partly represented. The narrative may seems logical and progressive, but it does not always question the deeper structures of caste hierarchy (Alone 142).

On the other hand, the Dalit writers write about lived experiences, what they have personally faced in their lives. Their work is not only about expressing oppression, but they also express it as a part of self-representation. Because of this, their writing feels more connected and real. It creates a strong emotional connection with the reader. Dalit Literature can be seen as a strong response to both “unrighteous rationality” and “protected ignorance” because it directly question back how caste is hidden, justified, and reproduced through knowledge system. It rejects the idea of rationality as neutral or universal, showing instead that what is considered logical thinking can be shaped by caste power. Instead of accepting such kind of reasoning, Dalit writing questions it by highlighting on daily experiences of resistance, humiliation and exclusion that are often get ignored. In this way, they turn rationality from a tool of justification into a tool of revealing injustice. At the same time, Dalit writing challenges “protected ignorance” by refusing to remain silent or invisible. It highlights experiences that mainstream knowledge often ignores or accepts as normal. Personal experiences and shared memories challenge what is presented as complete knowledge by showing what mainstream views often miss. By doing this, Dalit writing makes readers aware what is missing in mainstream knowledge. It also forces society to confront truths that were earlier denied or ignored. As a result, it gives voice to the unheard and corrects the gaps created by biased thinking and ongoing ignorance.

Dalit Literature plays an important role in “giving voice to voiceless”, which allows marginalized communities to tell their own stories instead of being represented by others^{xi}. This shift of representation to self-expression makes a major change in Indian literary traditions. Another important point is that Dalit writing is not only about discussing personal experience but also connected to larger social and political movements. Many Dalit writers get inspired by the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who raised voice and fought against caste discrimination and injustice. The difference between Dalit and non-Dalit writing can also be understood by examining its evolution over time. Earlier, many writers focused on showing how caste discrimination happened to people. Their aim was to make people aware of social problems.

Dalit Women in Patriarchal Society

Women in Indian society face multiple forms of discrimination, but the situation becomes more difficult for Dalit women due to both caste and gender at the same time. This situation is called “double oppression” where women face double oppression where they are marginalized both as people of lower caste and as women in patriarchal society. Dalit women are the most disadvantaged groups in Indian society. Dalit women’s oppression is the result of both untouchability and patriarchy, making their situation more difficult^{xii}. Another major issue is that their problems often get ignored. Their hard work, suffering, and labour are not given enough attention, either in literature or in society. Moreover, Dalit women face economic problems, they must do low paying jobs and physically demanding jobs that are not respected in society.

They also don't have proper access to education or better opportunities. Because of this they get trapped in a cycle of poverty and discrimination.

Another important aspect of Dalit women is the lack of respect and dignity. They are treated unfairly not because they are from lower caste but also because they are women. This weakens their self-confidence and restricts their opportunities for growth. Society often ignores their problems, which makes it even more difficult for them to express their problems or demand their rights. Education is another important area where Dalit women face many difficulties. Due to social discrimination and poverty, many girls cannot pursue education. Even though families do not see any value in educating girls, especially in lower-income communities. Lack of education also means that they are not fully aware of their rights and heightens their vulnerability to exploitation.

In addition, violence against women is also a serious issue. They are used to physical, emotional, and social violence more than anyone. Most of the time, such cases are not reported due to fear, lack of support, or pressure from society. This creates a situation where injustice happens, it shows how power dominates society where society protects those in higher positions while ignoring the suffering of marginalized groups. Another important point is representation. Earlier Dalit women were rarely seen in literature and media. But now their stories are being told more often. This representation plays a vital role in enhancing understanding of their struggles and challenges of stereotypes. It also provides Dalit women a sense of identity and recognition. At the same time, a change is taking place. Awareness regarding the Dalit women is increasing and more people are seen taking stands and speaking out against injustice. Government policies, social movements, and education are contributing to improvements, despite the slow pace of progress. Moreover, Dalit women are also becoming more aware and active in raising their voice and demanding equality. Overall, these factors demonstrate that the struggles of Dalit women are not limited and extend across various aspects of their lives. Their experience highlights the necessity for equality, respect, and social justice.

Conclusion

Caste in literature is not only about showing oppression but also about understanding how different voices shape its meaning. The way caste is written about often depends on who is telling the story, and this difference affects how deeply the reality is expressed. When experiences are described from a distance, they may create awareness, but they do not always capture the emotional and psychological depth of everyday discrimination. This makes the question of voice and perspective central to any meaningful understanding of caste. At the same time, caste cannot be looked at in isolation. It is closely connected with other structures like gender and class, which together influence people's lives in complex ways. The condition of women, especially those from marginalized communities, shows how inequality works on multiple levels at once. When these overlapping realities are ignored, the understanding of social injustice remains incomplete. A more layered approach allows a clearer view of how power operates in everyday life.

Another important concern is visibility. For a long time, many experiences remained unheard or were shaped by dominant viewpoints. The absence of direct voices created a limited picture of reality, where certain struggles were either softened or overlooked. Bringing these voices forward changes not only what is being said but also how it is understood. It shifts the focus from observation to experience, from sympathy to assertion. Even today, caste continues to influence social relationships, opportunities, and access to dignity. Legal equality has not fully removed social inequality, and this difference remains visible in everyday life. Because of this, discussions around caste remain relevant and necessary. Literature becomes a powerful space where these realities can be questioned, expressed, and reimagined.

Looking at caste through different perspectives opens up a deeper and more honest engagement with society. It encourages a move beyond surface-level understanding and invites reflection on issues that are often ignored. Such engagement is important not only for academic discussion but also for developing awareness and sensitivity. It creates the possibility of a more inclusive way of thinking, where equality is not just an idea but something that is actively understood and valued.

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