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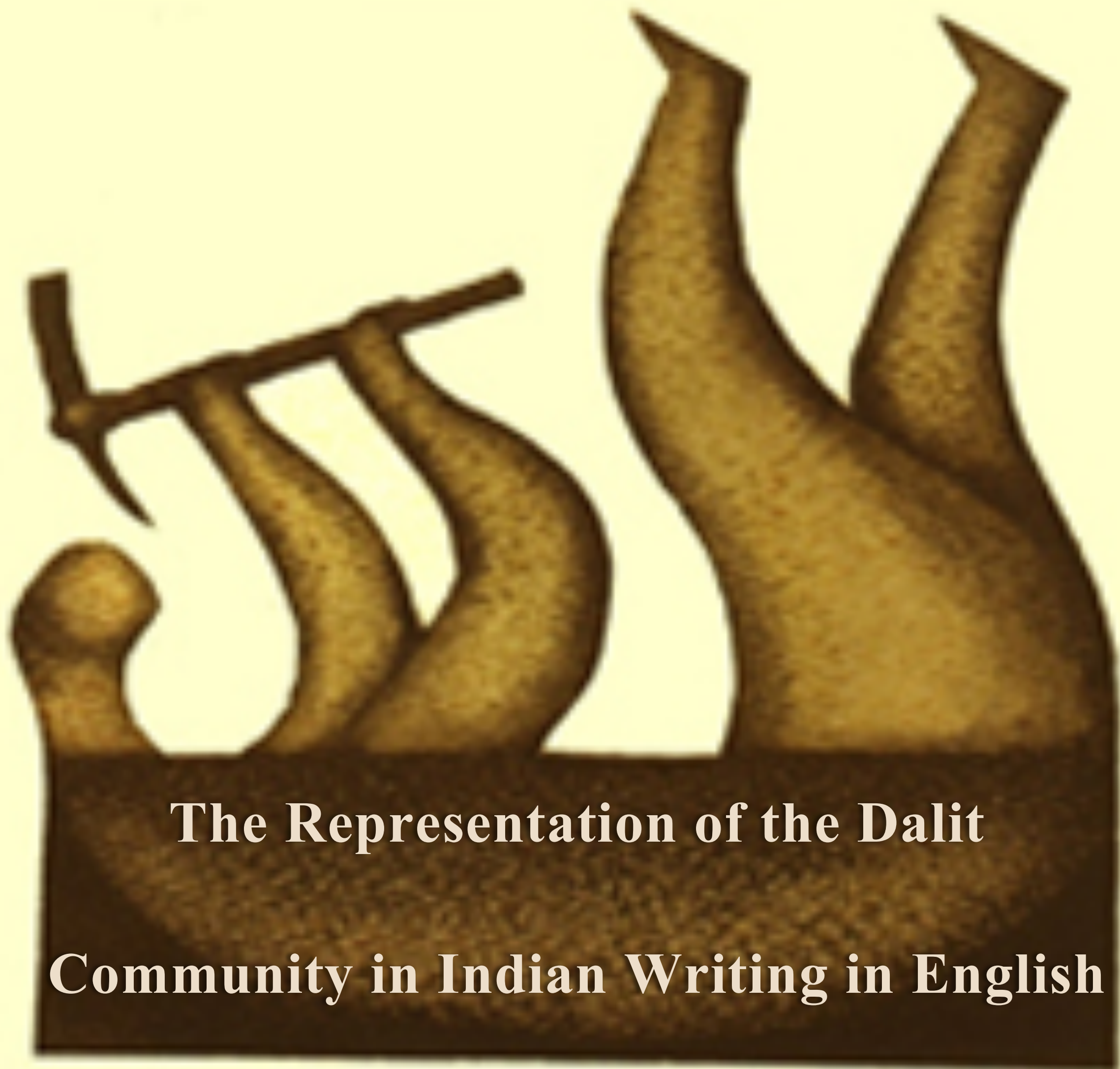

The Representation of the Dalit Community in Indian Writing in English

Bianca Chereché s

PhD Supervisor:

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2021

Universidad Zaragoza

The Representation of the Dalit Community in Indian Writing in English

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This thesis is dedicated to the pillars of my life, both personal and academic.

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INTRODUCTION

The Dalit community is a product of the caste system. The Hindu caste system is a social structure that prevails in South Asia and mainly in India and whose main characteristic is the hierarchical stratification and division of people into high castes and low castes.[1] Within this stratification membership in a specific caste is ascribed from birth, and for life, and vertical mobility is forbidden as each caste is considered inferior to those above and superior to those below.

The rules and regulations of the caste system vary across India but the most distinguishing features concern a segmental division of society and an established social hierarchy, marriage restrictions, dietary and living rules (prohibition of inter-dining, physical segregation, and civil and religious disabilities for different sections), and transgenerational and hereditary occupations (Gaikwad, 1999; Rao, 2000; Singh, 1996; Ghurye, 1950). As such, the casteist institution renders each caste as an endogamous group endowed with characteristics related to labour as well as to a set of social and cultural practices. The sociologist M. N. Srinivas (1962) and the anthropologist Louis Dumont (1970) agree in conceptualising 'caste' as a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group, having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. They add that relations —both connection and detachment— between castes are governed, among other things, by the notion of 'pollution and purity'.[2]

While the grammar of pollution and purity is usually seen as ordering caste relations as a whole, 'untouchability' is understood as its starkest manifestation. It is impossible to give an exact

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[1] Etymologically, the English word 'caste' derives from the Spanish and Portuguese *casta*, with its roots in Latin *castus*. It meant 'race', 'lineage', or 'breed'. When the Portuguese arrived in India in 1498 and encountered thousands of in-marrying hereditary Indian social groups, they called them 'castas', which became 'castes' in English in 1613 (Editors of the American Heritage, 2005: 210).

[2] Some scholars such as Quigley (1994, 1999) and Parry (1980) provide a counterargument which questions Dumont's central thesis that caste-based hierarchies ultimately rest on the idea of purity and pollution and are not comfortable connecting caste with occupation as they argue that in the vastly agrarian economy of South Asia agricultural labourers come from different castes; therefore, caste as a determinant of certain types of labour becomes a contested idea. Yet despite Quigley's argument, a large swathe of Hindu 'untouchables' are indeed identified with caste-based occupations.

definition of who is an ‘untouchable’ and who is not as it is not a legal term. ‘Untouchability’ is a social concept which has become embodied in a custom and as such it varies —both spatially and temporally. The concept of purity and impurity in this context is understood to permanently or temporarily mark bodies as abject, defiling and unworthy of social interaction. Therefore, certain occupations, foods and bodily processes are considered defiling; and this defilement is then manifest as untouchability by prohibitions on connubiality, commensality and access to public places.

G. N. Devy argues that there has to be a logic to the power and authority of these oppressive social traditions; “there has to be a rationale that can be stated with clarity so that it can be refuted, modified, altered and rectified” (Devy, 2018: 26). Theories on the origin of the caste system abound in literature and, although there is no definitive and widely accepted explanation for its genesis and consolidation as a legal convention, there are several that scholars agree upon.

Genesis of the Caste System

Delving into the ancient period of the Indian past, one finds a rigid caste-stratified social system in which the privileged position of a few depended upon the deprivation of others. Several theorists attribute this to an occupational theory according to which each caste group was pursuing its hereditary occupation strengthening thus the interdependence among different caste groups. The subsequent notion of hierarchy of castes stemmed from the superiority or inferiority of occupations and the creation of a draconian system to safeguard them (Hutton, 1946; Nesfield, 1885).

As a text with a relatively more certain historical description, and containing a clear statement of the basis on which ancient Indian social cartography was attempted, the Purusha Sukta hymn of the *Rigveda* is the most outstanding.[3] It describes the Purusha, or the universe, being divided by the gods: from its mouth came the Brahmin, from the arms the Kshatriya, from the thighs

[3] *Veda* (meaning ‘knowledge’ in Sanskrit) is a collection of poems or hymns that praised a wide pantheon of gods composed in archaic Sanskrit by Indo-European-speaking people who lived in northwest India during the 2nd millennium BCE. No definite date can be ascribed to the composition of the Vedas, but the period of about 1500-900 BCE is acceptable to most scholars. Its foremost collection (or *Samhita*) is the *Rigveda* (Britannica, n.d.).

the Vaishya, and from the feet the Shudra. Such mythological genesis was used in ancient India as a basis for law governing intercommunity relations, and the hierarchy of the vocationally high and the low implied in the Purusha Sukta was taken to mean a prescription with legal sanction.[4] Any attempt in thought, move or gesture to change the hierarchy came to be seen as a sin against the scriptures (Devy, 2018: 28).

The socio-historical theory bases itself on the conflicts born out of a struggle for political supremacy and control over land. It explains that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India, around 1500 BC, who were claimed to be fair-skinned people arriving from south Europe and north Asia.[5] Before their arrival, there were different communities in India all of which were disregarded by the Aryans and thus the skin colour became an important factor. The Aryans began conquering and taking control over regions in the north and pushed the local people —also known as 'Dravidians'— southwards or towards the jungles and mountains in north India.[6] The Aryans were organised in three groups or *varnas/jatis* which later developed into four: priests (Brahmin), warriors (Kshatriya), farmers and craftsmen (Vaishya), and labourers (Shudra).[7] In order to secure their status, they resolved some social

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[4] The most critical account of the process through which the formulation articulated in the Purusha Sukta came to acquire an irreversible legal sanction is to be found in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society* (1970). His work is probably one of the most open-minded enquiry into the history of the idea of social cartography in India.

[5] Later archaeological evidence suggests that 'Aryan' was not a social identity based on race —in the biological sense— but on a language or a group of inter-related languages. See Kosambi, *Ancient India* (1965), as well as Romila Thapar, "The First Millenium BC in Northern Indian" (1996b).

[6] The earlier perception of a clear-cut Aryan military victory over the Dravidians has been questioned in recent studies given the survival of large numbers of pre-Aryan populations and the many evidences of cultural heterogeneity and hybridisation in the period (Khair, 2001: 374). However, it has become obvious that there was a phase in which the Aryan language/s established a cultural, economic and political hegemony over other 'non-Aryan' —including Dravidian— languages (135).

[7] There is much confusion even in scholarly literature between *jati* and *varna* and they are often used interchangeably nowadays (Corbridge, Harriss & Jeffrey, 2013; Jhunjhunwala, 1999: 183; Agrawal, 1982: 44; Dutt, 1931: 4). Many also claim that *varnas* correspond to the four main categories into which Hindu society was divided and were further divided into thousands of *jatis* (Beteille, 1965; Mukherjee, 2003). Anand Teltumbde argues that *varna* is the *vedic* classification of the four-ranked occupational order, whereas caste (*jati*) refers to ranked hereditary, endogamous and occupational groups separated from each other by the ideas of purity and pollution. Classically, *varnas* defined the borders of Hinduism, whereas *jatis* were local and are rarely found beyond the borders of ethnolinguistic regions. The *varnas* may be taken as theoretical, whereas castes (*jatis*) are real and concrete (Teltumbde, 2017: 29-30). Andre Beteille adds that the terms 'caste' and 'sub-caste' are used as a replacement for *jati* while also denoting the concept of *varna*: "the English word caste is used to denote both. […] there is no real contradiction in this, for the word *jati* has a series of meanings, and by extension it is applied to what, according to traditional usage, should be designated as *varna*" (Beteille, 1965: 46). While acknowledging the importance of the 'osmosis' between *varna* and *jati*, Dumont (1970: 72-5) suggests that we might be better served if we were to understand the principles which give coherence to the structure of caste —also see Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma (1994: 3-5). It is not surprising then that when the colonial Europeans arrived in India,

and religious rules that were codified in the ancient Sanskrit text, *Manusmriti*.[8] Since in India, as in most societies, one's profession was passed on for generations creating larger communities undergoing the same labour, the different *varnas* developed social relations between them and organised themselves as communities. Tabish Khair argues that the Aryan-dominated integration —sometimes by force— of the tribal kingdoms led to the crystallisation of a generalised class division of society into a much more rigid structure in the shape of endogamous castes (Khair, 2001: 353).

Irfan Habib explains the later creation of the unmentioned fifth *varna* —the *Panchamas* or untouchables—[9] by the displacement and absorption of the hunting tribes by the Aryans (Habib, 1997). The untouchables were excluded from the caste system or *chaturvarna* and were forced to live outside the boundaries of the villages, subsisting on *Asprushyas* —the flesh of dead animals whose carcasses it was their duty to dispose (Abraham et al, 2018: 16). They were denied the *Upanayana* —the sacred thread ceremony which allowed the first three *varnas* to be born again— and they were prevented from studying the sacred texts of the Vedas (Mukherjee, 2003: xvii). Additionally, those who professed polluting professions were forced not only to avoid touching but also to stand at a certain distance from the high castes.

Anand Teltumbde proposes a materialist hypothesis according to which social systems come into being because the material conditions demand them. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, its natural endowment might have led the nomadic tribes —who began settling for agriculture— to change their social setting with the growth of surplus production. The priestly class of Brahmins assumed the role of a mediator between people and gods, and they propounded a theory of *karma* to justify the present order and fortify their own supremacist

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they found the social segmentation utterly confusing. They started noticing the sharp distinctions between the dominating and the dominated communities in India. But, while they could easily understand the linguistic, racial and organised theological distribution of Indian society and the economic segregation of the different classes, the vast diversity of *jatis* eluded their anthropological grasp.

[8] It is traditionally the most authoritative of the Hindu code books (*Dharma-shastra*) in India attributed to the legendary first man and lawgiver, Manu. Many scholars, such as G. N. Devy, point at the *Manusmriti* or *Manu Samhita* as "the fountainhead of the *varna/jati* ideas in India" (Devy, 2018: 26). The age of Manu ranges from the most orthodox estimate of 1500 BC to the most modest date of 200 AD. The uncertainty in dating raises the important question as to whether the *Manusmriti* merely precipitated what existed as a social and legal practice before it and in its own time, or whether it originally proposed and propagated these practices (28).

[9] They were technically called *avarnas* —meaning literally 'those outside the caste system fold' or 'without a caste'— as contrasted with the *savarnas* —those within its fold. Later, as the various castes evolved, the *avarnas* remained 'outcastes'. See Appalanaidu Pappala, *Tribes vs Castes* (2015).

position. While it made people accept their caste statuses as their destinies according to their past *karma* (previous deeds), it also motivated them to adhere to the caste *dharma* (religious duty) in order to be born into a higher caste in the next birth. Besides, there was a set of rules, as in the *Manusmriti*, that prescribed their behaviour and punishments for any deviation from the code. This entire superstructure would stabilise castes and would end up imposing the notion of hierarchy and stigma, especially to the vanquished tribes beyond the *chaturvarna* system. Teltumbde also points to the caste system's internal elasticity as the enabler for its survival, claiming that the commonplace understanding of the caste system as having held Indian society in fossilised form for over two millennia is therefore not quite correct (Teltumbde, 2017). The idea of some sort of mobility within the four-fold caste delimitation is shared by other scholars such as Tabish Khair, although he advises against denying the existence of a largely repressive and rigid caste system (Khair, 2001: 375).

While this narrative of defeat and degradation remained a remarkably constant theme, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar —the most important Dalit figure and ideologist— challenged the racial theories and maintained that India was a nation with a common racial stock.[10] He claimed that the hostility between castes was the result of historical evolution, which culminated in the emergence of caste as a perverse form of class. He argued that caste was the historical product of overlapping social, political and economic antagonisms held in tension through the Hindu law. In contrast to previous knowledge, Ambedkar contended that the Vedic Brahmins had been meat-eaters, and had adopted vegetarianism as a strategy to defeat Buddhism. The untouchables were Buddhist wandering tribesmen, the Broken Men,[11] who had been defeated in battle as nomadic society gave way to settled agriculture. As a consequence, the Broken Men had become dependent on eating dead cattle for survival, for which they were later

[10] Also referred to as 'Babasaheb' by his followers, Ambedkar came from a Mahar family, a caste of landless agricultural labourers considered 'untouchables' that served in the British army. Thanks to a new legislation passed in 1857, he was allowed to attend a 'touchable' local government school where he suffered intense discrimination and inequality and was made to sit apart from his classmates so as not to pollute them. After moving to Mumbai and doing his bachelor's degree, he was granted a scholarship to continue his studies abroad and in 1913 he was admitted to Columbia University in New York. In 1947 he was appointed India's first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution.

[11] Ambedkar developed his 'Broken Men' theory in his 1948 essay "The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables" (Ambedkar, 2013: 315). In the same vein, Jyotirao Phule, in his theory of the history of caste conflict, argues that the *Maha-ari* ('Great Enemy') had been severely punished by the Aryan-Brahmins for their fierce resistance to them. The *Maha-ari* were banished from society and condemned to poverty, to feeding on dead carcasses, and to wearing a black thread around their necks as a symbol of servitude (Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009: 16).

stigmatised.[12] Ambedkar argued that the real reason for their stigmatisation lays in their refusal to accept Brahmin hegemony.[13] This theorisation that attributed untouchability to the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahminism endowed Dalits with a Buddhist past identity,[14] and thereby laid claim to a genealogy for the Dalit outside Hindu history. [15]

Ambedkar saw the practice of endogamy as inherent in the processes that led to caste formation. According to him, in order to secure one's economy and privileges, the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas —being the most privileged classes— began enclosing themselves by becoming endogamous. Later, other *varnas* —which were subject to the law of social division of labour— developed subdivisions with social mobility of the class system. However, they also ended up losing the open-door character of the class system and became self-enclosed units called 'castes'. He argued that "Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them" (Ambedkar, 2014a: 18). Therefore, endogamy was superimposed on the tribal clan's exogamy in India through the 'infection of imitation' (22) and it ultimately resulted in the rigid formation of castes (13). In terms of the innumerable divisions and subdivisions of castes, Ambedkar claims that it was the penalty of excommunication for the violation of a code which resulted in a new caste. This idea of classes as the forerunners to endogamous castes is shared by Irfan Habib, who convincingly argues for a relatively late consolidation of these early classes into endogamous *jatis* (the word for 'caste' in much of north India even today).[16]

[12] The Gupta kings made cow killing a criminal offence and beef eating a sin in fourth century AD (Ambedkar, 2013: 379).

[13] Brahminism is the term that the anti-caste movement prefer over 'Hinduism'. By Brahminism they do not mean Brahmins as a caste or a community, but the domino effect, or what Ambedkar called the "infection of imitation", according to which the caste that first 'enclosed' itself —the Brahmins— created a system of "graded inequality", making it impossible to draw a clear line between victims and oppressors (Ambedkar, 2014a: 50-1).

[14] Ambedkar's development of his theory of untouchability on the basis of 'Broken Men' is problematic since, as candidly admitted by Ambedkar, it does not have any evidential support. He concludes saying: "No evidence is […] necessary when the majority of Hindus were Buddhists. We may take it that they were" (Ambedkar, 2013: 315).

[15] Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was thus a return to a religion that he described as an indigenous democracy. This was a complete rejection of Hindu inclusion, and simultaneously a critical effort to recreate Dalit selfhood by placing the Dalit outside the deforming narratives of Hindu history.

[16] Ambedkar wrote a paper called "Castes in India: Their Mechanisms, Genesis and Development" (1917) in which he argues that caste cannot be equated with either race or class because it is a unique social category —an enclosed, endogamous class. This paper was read before the Anthropology Seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweizer at The Columbia University, New York, on 9th May 1916 and it was later published in the volume XLI of *Indian Antiquary* in May 1917. However, while linking the evolution of castes to classes, it is difficult to defend a contemporary one-to-one identification of castes with classes. As Irfan Habib points out, "during the last hundred years or more, the hereditary division of labour has been greatly shaken, if not shattered" (Habib qtd. in Khair, 2001: 134). In this way caste demarcations do not always tally with class border; but they so often still do.

The colonial period marked the final phase of the development of the caste system in two starkly different ways. On the one hand, it put the broad structure under pressure through the processes of industrialisation and modernisation. On the other hand, it rigidly codified and consolidated the system and the different identities with reference to late Brahminical texts — such as the *Manusmriti* or *The Laws of Manu*— instead of the ground realities which, according to Tabish Khair, were more complex in spite of a hegemonising Brahminical ideal of social stasis-cum-stability (Khair, 2001: 368-69). C. A. Bayly (1997) suggests that the British intervention in the 18th and early 19th centuries may have left its own impact on the succeeding caste system by creating even more rigid (and textual) hierarchies. Practices that helped produce colonial knowledge, like the census and caste and tribe surveys in the 19th century, classified and organised Indian society according to the four-fold *varna* model of social division,[17] with Brahmins at the top and 'untouchables' at the bottom of the census table. Furthermore, the colonial state enumerated and identified impure occupations as a unique feature of 'untouchable' communities. Thus, colonial policies reinforced casteist notions in Indian society and ensured in a way caste Hindus' domination of the modern institutional apparatus.

The historian Nicholas Dirks, in his engaging study entitled *Castes of Mind* (2001), also suggests that 'caste' as we know it today is no ancient survival but a modern phenomenon, the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and British colonial rule:

> It was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. (Dirks, 2001: 5)

[17] In 1901, the then commissioner of the census, Sir Herbert Hope Risley, conducted the first census of India and classified the thousands of *jatis* into castes. Caste was what the Europeans knew and experienced, and they promptly applied that framework onto India as well. The reality was that the *jatis* of India were very fluid and in constant motion based on resources. What were until then India's innumerable *jatis* and sub-*jatis* was now slotted into fixed 'castes' by Risley (Guha, 2014; Ferro-Luzzi, 1976).

Finally, some academics, while denying its logic and contesting its morality, see the religious sanctioning of caste-as-hierarchy in Hindu holy scriptures (especially the Vedas) as a main reason for the longevity of the caste system. Deriving from and reinforcing the status of the Brahmins, caste as a specific form of social stratification is regarded as a product of Brahmin dominance (Dirks, 2001).

The Politics of Naming

When dealing with Dalits it becomes necessary to examine the practices of naming. An analysis of the multiple, shifting, and contested meanings of being Dalit and the politics of this plurality shows the varied concerns at work, especially the social and psychological challenges inherent in such acts of identification. As B. R. Ambedkar claimed, "Names are symbols. Each name represents association of certain ideas and notions about a certain object. It is a label. From the label people know what it is" (Ambedkar, 1989: 419). Dalits have received different names throughout history such as *avarnas*, *panchamas*, *chandalas*, untouchables, outcastes, Depressed Classes and Castes, *harijans*, Scheduled Castes and Dalits, among many others. It has often been noted that the particular names allotted to subaltern groups become synonyms for negative attributes, even terms of abuse. This fusion of name and stigma naturalises and legitimises group subordination. The debate around the use of different terms for the subordinated is tied to the community's ideological struggle to arrive at a single self-defined and definitive social taxonomy. Thus, the strategies of naming struggle against the burdens of a stigmatised past as well as the challenge of exclusion and inclusion.

As mentioned previously, according to the traditional terminology, the caste Hindus were called *savarnas* and those outside the pale of the four-fold *varna* system were referred to as *avarnas* or *antyaja*. In the Brahmin *dharmarayja* of late 18th century Maharashtra (Bayly, 1999: 65-9; Chakravarti, 1998: 9-31),[18] the hierarchy of purity and pollution prevailed with the Brahmins considering themselves the purest and the *antyaja* being regarded as the most

[18] In 18th century Maharashtra, the ruling Brahmin regime legitimised its claim to the highest ritual position as well as to social and political power by referring to their state as *dharmarajya* (the rule of righteousness) (Chakravarti, 1998: 31).

polluted and thus the lowest in the social scale. This was valorised through reference to the ancient text of *Manusmriti* which endorsed the *varna* system (8-9).

This agenda informed the ethnographic surveys of tribes and castes and the census reports that the British compiled in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century (Dirks, 2001: 43-60).[19] Since there appeared to be no unified scheme of classification, and the officials in the colonial government were eager to create clear pan-Indian categories, they applied a pseudo-scientific racial theory of distinguishing castes in India (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006: 112).[20] Schemes of classification initially varied greatly from province to province, and the census takers were frustrated by people's 'inability' to return consistent answers when asked about their caste (Charsley, 1996: 3). In these writings, terms such as *Ati-Shudra* (lower than the Shudra) and *Ashprusha Shudra* (untouchable Shudra) were used for those considered ritually polluted and outside the pale of respectable society. It was in this period that the idea of the 'untouchables' as a distinct social segment was taken up by socio-religious and nationalist reformers, among them B. R. Ambedkar. Himself an 'untouchable', Ambedkar saw this label as having the potential to unite people of different castes and languages through emphasising their common experience of being at the receiving end of both caste and class hierarchies.

Indian social reformers were less happy with the term, preferring instead *bahujan samaj*, which was coined around 1906 within Jyotirao Phule's *Satyashodhak* (Truth-seekers) non-Brahmin movement.[21] Literally the 'majority community' or the 'majority of society', *bahujan samaj* retains widespread positive and powerful connotations in Maharashtrian social and political life today (Omvedt, 1976: 4-5). Gandhi also rejected the term 'untouchable' replacing it with

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[19] One of them was James Mill's influential history of India in which he spoke of "the wretched Shudra" (Mill, 1968: 139).

[20] Late 19th century British anthropology elaborated an array of 'racial' differences that not only distinguished Indians from 'Whites', but also mapped racial attributes to various castes and tribes. In turn, many upper-caste Indians were eager to embrace racial theories that 'proved' their superiority by placing them closer to White Europeans and distanced them from lower castes (Guha, 1999).

[21] Jyotirao 'Jyotiba' Phule was a 19th-century Indian social reformer mostly known for campaigning for women's and Dalits' rights. Apart from the expression *bahujan samaj*, the category of the *shudra-atishudra* was also the end result of Phule's effort to produce a new ethical community which would also be a political constituency that could be united in the struggle against Brahminism. Phule transvalued Orientalist as well as nationalist fascination with theories of Aryan conquest to argue that a permanent and irreconcilable hostility between Brahmins and non-Brahmins characterised caste society from its inception.

harijan —meaning 'children of god'—[22] which he borrowed from the 14th century Gujarati saint and poet, Narsingh Mehta (Shah, 2001). He primarily appealed to caste Hindus to use the term *harijan* instead of *Antyaja* explaining,

> The untouchable to me is, as compared to us (caste Hindus) really a Harijan —a man of God— and we are Durjana (men of evil). For whilst the untouchable has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the short coming and faults that we may lay at the door of these untouchables. It is still open to us to be Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sin against them. (Gandhi, 1971: 244)

For Gandhi the new category aimed at persuading caste Hindus to express repentance. By doing so, they were expected to change their heart and behaviour towards 'untouchables'. But Gandhi's slogan of 'harijan' to end untouchability was considered by many an act of mitigation, or 'deradicalisation' of the untouchable question; it denied them the possibility of participating actively in his project of social reform, and instead turned them into passive recipients of upper caste charity.[23]

Ambedkar considered naming itself a strategy of critiquing casteist discourse and countering religious superstition and ideological indoctrination by taking control over the act of representation. He found no difference whether the 'untouchables' were called *achchuta* or 'harijan', as the nomenclature did not change their status in the social order (Shah, 2001: 21). He argued that the name 'harijan' only invited pity from upper castes and did not allow 'untouchables' to escape from the curse of untouchability. In fact, Ambedkar opposed Gandhi's move by not only retaining the term 'untouchable' but using it with an assertive capital letter.

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[22] Gandhi rebaptised 'untouchables' with this patronising epithet. 'Hari' is the name for a male deity in Hinduism and 'jan' means 'people'. *Harijans* are 'people of god', although in order to infantilise them even further, in translation they are referred to as 'Children of God' (Gandhi, 1971).

[23] Gandhian discussions of reforming Hindu society relied heavily on the reform of the untouchables' impure occupation of scavenging. An ideal Bhangi, Gandhi claimed, would be an expert who "would know the quality of night soil and urine" because of his 'scientific' education. Gandhi maintained that the varna model of social division consisting of four orders (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) is an ideal system because the "callings of a Brahmin —spiritual teacher— and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God" (Gandhi, 1971: 127).

He agreed that though the name ‘Untouchable’ was “a bad name that repels and stinks”, he preferred it because “it is better for the wrong doer that the wrong is there still to be redressed” (Ambedkar, 1989: 363). He also disapproved of the term ‘ex-Untouchable’ which appeared to deny the fact that untouchability continued to be practised.[24] Despite Ambedkar’s endorsement, the term ‘untouchable’ was rejected emphatically by many Dalits due to its extreme negative connotations.

Before the colonial census schemes there was no homogeneity between the outcastes in terms of classification. They received different names in different parts of the country such as *pariahs*, *panchamas*, *ati-shudras*, *avarnas*, *antyajas* and *namashudras*, and they were even classified as ‘untouchables’, ‘unapproachables’, and ‘unseenables’ depending on their social status and occupation. During colonial rule, the British had initially deployed the bureaucratic term ‘Depressed Classes’ as an umbrella term for all untouchable communities denoting the class poverty that commonly coincided with low caste status.[25] This term was replaced by ‘Scheduled Castes’ in 1935 by the Government of India Act —a term that continues to be used in official parlance till date—[26] which stated that Scheduled Castes were those ‘untouchables’ who accepted the caste system (Gaikwad, 1999).[27] This category created “in the service of the

[24] Harrold Issac has used the category of ‘ex-untouchables’ in his study (Issac, 1965) as well as Barbara Joshi (Joshi, 1980).

[25] The term ‘Depressed Classes’ (DC) appears to date back to the 1870s when it first appeared in the volumes of the *Bombay Gazetteer*, although the term was applied officially only in 1912. In the early 1930s, the Census Commissioner J. H. Hutton argued in his census report that the previous “unfortunate and depressing label” should be abandoned for ‘exterior castes’ (Charsley, 1996: 7). Significantly, it was members of the so-called ‘Depressed Classes’ who questioned the category as a separate interest deserving special consideration. In 1931 at the All India Round Table Conference, Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan observed that the term ‘DC’ was degrading and contemptuous. They therefore proposed alternative terms such as ‘non-caste Hindus’, ‘Protestant Hindus’, or even ‘non-conformist Hindus’ (Ambedkar, 1977: 317) —terms that reflected Ambedkar’s keen desire to mark a sharp break from Hindu identity. Ambedkar’s attempts proved unsuccessful as the Government of India Act of 1935 replaced the term ‘DC’ by another derogatory title, ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SC). Analogous to the Ambedkarite logic of embracing the term ‘Untouchable’ as a mark of oppression, an attempt was made to give the initials ‘DC’ a more militant connotation by interpreting them as standing for ‘Discriminated Castes’, a term that brought out the suffering of such people in a more assertive manner.

[26] The colonial authorities first applied the term ‘Scheduled’ in 1928 and census officials and various government committees were subsequently ordered to create lists of Scheduled Castes —a project that was completed in 1936. This list became the basis for subsequent lists of SC after Independence, and the people thus identified were popularly referred to as ‘SCs’. While there was no agreed definition to be used to place a caste in this category, some broad considerations were taken into account, such as the historical position of certain castes in Hindu society who were denied access to temples and schools, or had to use separate wells or had to suffer similar discrimination. It is the SC category that has become popular in general and legal usage (Galanter, 1984: 121-30).

[27] Arundhati Roy argues that the term ‘Scheduled Castes’ is mainly a religious category as the constitutional and legal protections attached to this category are not applied to those Dalits that have converted out of Hinduism,

colonial state" (Sharan, 2003: 279) differentiated among outcastes according to their standing in the caste hierarchy, levels of socioeconomic and educational progress, and levels of political consciousness. In other words, the existing description of Scheduled Castes is not based on the self-representation of the castes in question but derives from the worldview of native élites and colonial ethnographers. It also made outcastes a legally unique and separate population that was worthy of individual consideration and eventual legislation (Rao, 2001).[28]

Thus, British colonial legislation grouped heterogeneous castes into a single category, first as Depressed Classes and later as Scheduled Castes. This grouping of disparate castes has eroded the differences and diversities among them and has led to a fundamentally false perception that 'untouchables' are united rather than fractured communities. However, the identity of various untouchable castes as unitary has also given rise to a trend of consolidating power of collective resistance; while earlier they might have suffered in isolation, now they could resist together (Kaviraj, 1997: 9).[29]

The nomenclature 'Scheduled Castes' —reproduced and legitimised by the state— became their official identity in independent India but it failed to reflect the centuries of misery and struggle of the 'untouchables' and did not carry with it their desired meaning of assertion. Against this, the category of 'Dalit' emerged in the 20th century as a new self-defined political and ethical subject who challenged existing and dominant accounts of history, politics and culture. It rejected categories such as 'untouchables', 'Depressed Classes', Scheduled Castes' and 'harijans' coined by colonial, Hindu and nationalist discursive practices respectively, not

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especially Christians and Muslims (Roy, 2013: 143). She adds: "The official nomenclature of prejudice is a maze that can make everything read like a bigoted bureaucrat's file notings" (21).

[28] There has been great contestation over inclusion into the categories of SC. Apart from the 'untouchables' who suffered specific physical discrimination, there was another section of Indian society which was economically and educationally backward. They contended that the category known as 'Depressed Classes' should not only include 'untouchables' in the strict sense, and asked for equal legal visibility and recognition of other disenfranchised communities. Article 15(4) of the Constitution of India defines the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) for the purpose of affirmative action as 'Socially and Educationally Backward Classes of citizens'. Unlike the Scheduled Castes, the 'Other Backward Classes' as a category was not exclusive to the Hindus; rather, it extends to other religions such as Christianity and Islam —theoretically said to be free from caste system (Charsley, 1996; Cohn, 1987; Deliège, 1997).

[29] Nevertheless, the SC category became the basis for the political representation of the 'untouchables' in colonial India and the makers of the Constitution of India, instead of addressing this fundamental question, blindly adopted the colonial category for the distribution of reservations in post-independence India (Galanter, 1984: 122-23).

only to contest dominant ascription of outcastes' identities but also to question the notions of impurity and pollution attached to their community, identity and history.

'Dalit' means 'ground down', 'crushed' or 'broken to pieces' in both Marathi and Hindi with the Sanskrit root *dal*.[30] It may have been used for the first time in this manner by Jyotirao Phule in order to describe the outcastes and 'untouchables' as the oppressed and exploited people by the *dwija* castes.[31] However, its most famous use was by Ambedkar in his journal *Bahishkrut Bharat* ("India of the Outcaste") in the 1920s.[32] Ambedkar first defined 'dalithood' as "life conditions which characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahmanical ideology" (Guru, 2001b: 100; Omvedt, 1994). Such a formulation allowed Ambedkar to unite ascriptive groups that were victims of economic hardship, and not necessarily restrict himself to untouchable communities, and to point out a particular oppressor —the upper-caste Brahminical order. 'Dalithood' was therefore a means towards achieving a sense of identity — social, political and cultural; it signified a site of confrontation, a willingness to struggle for justice and equality, for self-elevation and self-pride for all who were oppressed. Although Ambedkar did not popularise the word 'Dalit', his philosophy has remained a key source in its emergence and popularity.[33]

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[30] Etymologically, the origins of the term 'Dalit' can be traced back to the Buddha's usage of the Pali *dalidda* in the *Dalidda Sutta* since in Pali Buddhist literature, the term *dalidda* (*daridra* in Sanskrit) is used for the property-less poor (Sadangi, 2008: 60; Mencher, 2013: 201).

[31] Phule often used the term *dalittuthan* (uplift of the downtrodden) although he preferred the term *Ati-Shudra* for 'untouchables' in his writings (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998: 4).

[32] The category of 'Dalit' was defined by Ambedkar in a most comprehensive way, although he did not use this category very often in his writing. He particularly used it in his Marathi speeches and occasionally in his Marathi writings along with *Bahishkrut* (boycotted) and *Asprushya varga* (untouchable class) (Teltumbde, 2017: 12). In fact, he used a number of different categories depending on the context. For example, when he was dealing with the imperial state, he would use the category 'Depressed Classes'. If he was addressing high-caste Hindu adversaries, he would use the term *Bahiskrit* (one who is an outcaste). In the arena of competitive politics, he would use the term 'Scheduled Caste'. Finally, when addressing his own social constituency, he preferred to use the term 'Pad Dalit', meaning those who are crushed under the feet of the Hindu system (Guru, 2001b).

[33] While his own caste men (*Mahars*) enthusiastically followed him, many members from other Dalit castes held off from supporting him. In the early phase of his movement —when the struggle reflected an assertion of social and religio-cultural rights of Dalits mainly focusing on the feature of untouchability— it appeared to work with other Dalit castes. But once he turned his sight to politics, the ruling classes could easily lure them away. It was only with the passing of time, as the advanced elements in other Dalit castes realised Ambedkar's contribution to their own advancement and the organisational strength of the Ambedkarite Dalits, that these castes began to respect him as their leader and began to accept the Dalit identity (Teltumbde, 2017).

The term gained new potency in Maharashtra during the 1970s, a period of literary and cultural efflorescence, when a group of activists and writers called ‘Dalit Panthers’ started the Dalit Panther Movement.[34] In their Manifesto, published in 1973, they proffered an expansive definition of ‘Dalit’ to include “members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion” (Omvedt, 1995: 72). By collapsing caste, class, gender and religion under one umbrella, injustice was to be defined in the broadest frame.[35] All sorts of injustices of misrecognition and maldistribution were invoked, so much so that the term ‘Dalit’ has acquired a solidarity value —not necessarily in terms of naming primary harms or strategies of transformation.

‘Dalit’ has transcended its etymological boundaries and has come to represent a quasi-class identity against the prevailing Hindu social order.[36] As Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) —a radical Marathi writer and major ideologue of the Dalit Panthers— articulated, ‘Dalit’ is a revolutionary category (Bagul, 1981), thus reworking the term to emphasise a radical political purview. In the same vein, Gopal Guru adds:

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[34] James Massey contends that it is the Dalit Panthers who “gave currency to the term ‘Dalit’ as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both their state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed” (Massey qtd. in Brueck, 2014: 186-87). M. N. Wankhede, who was picked by Ambedkar to teach English in the Milind College at Aurangabad, informed this group of Dalit youth about the American Black Panthers. During two Dalit literary conferences held in 1967 and 1971, he urged Dalit writers to reject the tradition of Hindu epic poetry and *bhakti* saint-poetry and create an alternative literature, as African-American writers had done (Dangle, 1992a). He persuaded them to follow the path of the American Black Panthers —a radical organisation active in the US from the late 1960s whose objective is the protection of the African-American community. This new group included members such as Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle, Prahlad Chendwankar and Daya Pawar. The decision to call it ‘Dalit Panthers’ was announced by Dhasal in his journal *Vidroh* (“Revolt”) in June 1972. The first split occurred in mid-1974 when an attempt was made to give a clear ideological direction to the movement through a manifesto.

[35] While there are contestations on what such an account privileges, especially in the context of politics of Dalit Panthers (Rege, 1998, 2000; Omvedt, 1993), there are also debates on what such a naming prompts. For instance, Webster suggests that this kind of understanding tends to privilege class analyses (Webster, 2007b: 76), and Omvedt argues that it brings caste and class together, through an understanding of Hinduism as feudal backwardness (Omvedt, 1995: 72-80). However, this mode of analysis fails to be comprehensive as it overshadows many subject positions, as is the case of Dalit women.

[36] The Dalit Panther Manifesto’s account differs from that of Ambedkar’s. Unlike Ambedkar’s, the manifesto’s definition of ‘Dalit’ does not centre on caste relations. Omvedt explains this arguing that in Ambedkar’s time the contrast between caste and class was drawn in terms of a distinction between culture and economics, whereas the Dalit movements of the 1970s and 1980s sought to unify economic and cultural oppression. Therefore, it is this distinction —between culture and economics in terms of caste and class, respectively— that separates the Dalit politics of the 1970s and 1980s from that of Ambedkar’s time (Omvedt, 1995: 75).

> [Dalit Panthers] view [Dalit] as a revolutionary category for its hermeneutic ability to recover the revolutionary meaning of the historical past of the Dalit and its great capacity to reach out to larger sections of people. Not as a linguistic construction, […] based on a materialist epistemology. On the contrary, it is historically constructed through revolutionary struggle of the Dalits. […] this category has an ontological ability to encompass within itself the lower castes —Adivasis, toiling classes and women. (Guru, 2005b: 67)

Dalit writer and critic Sharankumar Limbale defines 'Dalit' as the term that "describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes" (Limbale, 2004: 11) and adds that those who are "lagging behind economically will also need to be included" (11). This undermines untouchability as the only reference point for defining the Dalit and contends that it is precisely the experiences that flow from a centuries-old hierarchical and hereditary system that make the Dalit unique and distinct. All other experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression —experiences that resemble those of other groups— result from this fundamental reality.[37]

Dalit politics has sought to unify various diffuse castes and sub-castes under a single and cohesive descriptor, meant to denote both the system of oppression under which they struggle as well as the insurgent spirit and self-awareness to overcome that oppression.[38] For many Dalits, the term itself is not a mere replacement for the labels bestowed from 'above' —such as the demeaning 'untouchable' and 'ex-untouchable', the condescending 'harijan', or the administrative 'Scheduled Caste'; rather, it designates a subset of these wider categories who

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[37] Following Ambedkar, many Dalit ideologues such as Baburao Bagul and Sharankumar Limbale tried to widen the definition of 'Dalit' to the oppressed in general, including the Scheduled Tribes or Adivasis, other Depressed Castes and Classes, and working people and women who were exploited politically and economically (Guru, 2001b: 99; Limbale, 2004: 11). In this sense, the 'Dalit' was to be perceived as inclusive, building on Ambedkar's pragmatic strategy of strengthening horizontal solidarities among lower castes to resist the Brahminical élite. The objective was to convert 'Dalit' in a mobilising slogan and agent that could bring under its umbrella all the subalterns and oppressed social groups and, by adopting a language of class, it attempted to forge a solidarity of the oppressed.

[38] Although the spirit of a modern Dalit movement was alive in various forms in a plethora of anticaste movements since the very beginning, strictly speaking, the seed of 'Dalit' as a political identity was sown with the establishment of the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942, later appropriated by the Maharastra *Dalit Sahitya Sangha* in the first *Dalit Sahitya Sammelan* (Dalit Literature Conference) held in 1958 in Mumbai.

are politically aware, motivated, and participant in the Dalit struggle, united under an identity created within the community, from 'below' (Brueck, 2014).[39]

This is linked to Anupama Rao's idea of the term 'Dalit' as both descriptive and prescriptive, as it defines historical structures and practices of dispossession that experientially mark someone as Dalit and simultaneously identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those same structures. She understands it as a product and expression of Ambedkar's political thought by noting that Ambedkar provided the set of political idioms that most effectively converted the negative identity of the 'untouchable' into the political potentiality and historical agency of the Dalit (Rao, 2009).

'Dalit', thus, hinges on whether a given category represents a monolith, a historical reality, or refers to multiple, polycentric, polyphonic and dynamic relations of life. The label 'Dalit' is said to embody and signal specific political and social aspirations that are not necessarily commensurate with the subjectivities it seeks to describe in its accounts. It also implies a caste hierarchy which marks for many a static and binding association with the bottom and, therefore, reifies their particular caste position and essentialises caste identities. Many resort to rejecting the system and, with it, the term 'Dalit' itself, which creates them as abject and hapless. The post-independence period has seen the rise of a plethora of new terminologies adding to the confusion.[40]

Following Ambedkar's famous massive conversion to Buddhism as an act of rejection of Hinduism and the caste system attached to it,[41] many Dalits have continued to shed Hinduism

[39] The political contours of the term 'Dalit' for Ambedkar and subsequent generations following in his political legacy are considered in depth by Eleanor Zelliot (2005).

[40] The insightful article by Gopal Guru (2001b) deals with the historical and epistemic foundations of 'Dalit', analysing the different categories that represent multiple identities in this context and the changing semantics.

[41] Disillusioned by his reading of Hinduism as a social system and the lack of change brought about by his political efforts, in 1935 he decided to "reject all claims to Hinduism and to convert to another religion" (Zelliot, 2005: 157). In what has later been called his 'Conversion Speech', given as an address to the Mahar Conference in 1935, Ambedkar famously stated: "Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. […] Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. […] I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an Untouchable. However, it is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power" (Ambedkar qtd. in Zelliot, 2005: 206). Zelliot explains that, for the first few years, "Ambedkar flirted with Islam, Sikhism and Christianity in an attempt to combine a personal need for self-respect […] with an astute political move that would allow Untouchables more political power" (193). Twenty-one years after his Conversion Speech, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in Nagpur in the erstwhile Bombay Presidency on 14 October 1956, along with many of his followers resulting in three million converts (Beltz, 2005: 55-7). The conversion was later legitimised by Ambedkar's claim that Dalits were in fact originally Buddhists. He argued that their present condition as

in favour of Buddhism throughout the 20th century. A small section of these Buddhist and neo-Buddhist converts have rejected the concept of 'Dalit' arguing that it is not only too broad, but it also has a sting of humiliation which seems to encourage casteism and classism.[42] Since the 1980s, the term 'Dalit' has also been used in conjunction with the term 'Bahujan' —meaning 'majority'— which according to Ganguly refers to a political and discursive front which includes lower castes, ex-untouchables, peasants and women (Ganguly, 2008: 132). Lately, some educated, middle-class Dalits believe that the category connotes a negative description since it ignores the social, political, and religious transformation undergone by the community. Hence, for some "Dalit is for the most part merely a veneer that has little relevance in everyday life" (Guru, 2001b: 106); a category that emerged out of a social, historical and political movement deployed mainly in literary and political circles and with not much resonance in the consciousness of many groups thus labelled, whose identities are still rooted in their particularistic experiences of social difference.

In January 2008, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) asked the Union and State governments not to use the word 'Dalit' in official documents and correspondence as a substitute for the Scheduled Castes, arguing that it lacks constitutional validity. Yet, despite the changing connotations of the term, 'Dalit' functions largely in society as a substitute for Scheduled Castes, as well as in the media and in academic discourses.[43]

Looking at the politics of naming allows us to address 'Dalit' not so much as a name, but as a field of contestation and significance, that is, as a political and militant category with a history which finally led to the elaboration of Dalit identity. An important political development in

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'untouchables' deprived of access to resources was the outcome of a historical civilisational conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism (Omvedt, 2003: 17-18). Following this, Dalits' embrace of Buddhism would not really be "'conversion' to a new religion, but liberation and a return to their original identity" (18).

[42] Eleanor Zelliot is critical of this tendency to classify 'ex-untouchable' Buddhists as "Buddhists with a prefix", either 'neo-Buddhists' or 'Ambedkarite Buddhists' (2005: 233). Laura Jenkins adds that "the 'neo' label is particularly hurtful to those who consider their conversion a return to past identity", as it denies the myth that Dalits were former Buddhists (Jenkins, 2009: 162).

[43] The media did not escape this controversy and on August 7, 2018, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting issued a circular 'advising' the media to refrain from using the word 'Dalit' when referring to those belonging to Scheduled Castes. In response to this petition, the Supreme Court termed it as arbitrary, irrational, unreasonable, and discriminatory, and going against fundamental rights to equality (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), and freedom (Article 19), all guaranteed in the Indian Constitution (The Tribune, 2018). The widespread currency of the term legitimises its use from this point forward in this dissertation when referring to oppressed castes in India at any point. Nevertheless, as 'untouchable-ness' as a concept and a term marked a particular formation of casteist oppression, it shall be used as appropriate when quoting from a discriminatory casteist view.

India in the last few decades has been the Dalit struggle for identity and rights. Built on an anti-caste plank, Dalit has moved beyond the framework of caste and began to represent a symbol of change.

Grassroots Activism and Gandhi and Ambedkar counterpoint

In order to challenge the hegemony of the upper castes, Ambedkar argued that it was not just the pollution-purity stigma around untouchability, but caste itself that had to be dismantled. The practice of untouchability, cruel as it was, was the performative, ritualistic end of casteist tradition. The real violence of caste was the denial of entitlement —to land, wealth, knowledge, equal opportunity— maintained through threats of egregious and ubiquitous violence.

Ambedkar insisted on Dalits being treated as an independent political entity that needed to be represented through separate electorates,[44] an issue that made him come into fierce conflict with Gandhi and which further intensified during the two Round Table Conferences held in 1930 and 1931, respectively.[45] Gandhi opposed to any separate representation of Dalits on

[44] Ambedkar thought that the reservation of seats for Dalits in the Congress would only produce docile workers for upper-caste Hindus and, therefore, promoted the idea of a separate electorate for them. Gandhi opposed the separate electorates for Dalits or any other minority, claiming that this would create a division in Hinduism. Instead, he noted that the Depressed Classes' identity had to be transcended, and not reified. Furthermore, he offered a powerful explanation against the special or separate political representation of Dalits: "Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity […], so may Muslims, so may Europeans. Would 'untouchables' remain untouchables in perpetuity?" (Gandhi qtd. in Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009: 25-6).

[45] Gandhi plunged into the national movement when he returned to India in 1915, after twenty years of political activity in South Africa. His first concern was to stitch together the various constituencies and later claim the legitimate and sole representation of the emerging nation. For Gandhi, the new India had to be a *swaraj* (self-rule) of all the people. But 'people' was far from being a homogeneous category, and the public he addressed implied mainly Hindus (Ambedkar, 2014a: 45). Gandhi wrote "Hind Swaraj", his first and most famous political tract, in 1909. Written as a conversation between two people, it focuses on the tolerance and inclusiveness between Hindus and Muslims, while defining India as 'a Hindu land'. Issues such as 'casteism' or 'untouchability' are hardly and superficially mentioned in the essay —other than the reference to generational occupations as a kind of social organisation— proving Gandhi's main agenda. In 1930, at the First Round Table Conference —during which the new Constitution was to be framed, and at which representatives of various minority communities such as Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and Dalits attended— Ambedkar presented his memorandum titled "A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of a Self-Governing India". In Condition No. 5 of that memorandum he asked for Dalits' "Adequate Representation in the Services", a petition that eventually evolved into the system of reservation in educational institutions and government jobs. He also proposed a system of positive discrimination for Dalits within the electoral system arguing that they were always going to be a minority given their marginal physical and social position across the country. Gandhi utterly disagreed with Ambedkar's idea of separate electorates for Dalits, claiming: "I would far rather that Hinduism died than that Untouchability lived" (Gandhi qtd. in Ambedkar, 2014a: 68).

legislatures claiming that it would create an 'unbridgeable schism' among Hindus. He argued that, since it was a problem of Hindu social custom, it could not be treated by laws. Ambedkar, however, understood Hindu ideology as justifying a complex form of inequality, characterised by secular and religio-ritual forms of exclusion. The emancipation, according to him, could not be contained within these existing social relations that lack any procedural mechanism or political form that could adequately respond to the complexity of caste inequality. The separate electorate, he argued, was undoubtedly a political option for disenfranchised minorities such as Dalits. In response to Ambedkar's petition, in August 1932 the British prime minister announced the Communal Award that reserved seats with separate electorate along with the right to vote in general constituencies was to be granted to Dalits. Gandhi protested against this decision with his infamous fast unto death in the Yerwada Jail, Pune, where he served sentence for having revived the Civil Disobedience movement (Teltumbde, 2017: 102). Ambedkar was aware of the fact that the threat on Gandhi's life would widen the gap between upper and lower castes, and would turn reactionary forces aggressive against Dalits. So as to avoid this, he eventually gave in and accepted a compromise in the form of the 'Poona Pact' which did away with the idea of separate electorates.[46] Certainly, Ambedkar and Gandhi presented parallel programmes for Dalits and became the most celebrated figures in campaigning against untouchability.

The oppression of Dalits has proved to have a long history, but the history of their protest is also a very long one. Although the anti-caste struggle is usually associated with Ambedkar, the efforts of leaders, activists, thinkers and reformers such as Jyotirao Phule (1827-90), Savitribai Phule (1831-97), Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), among many others, should not be ignored. The 'Dalit movement' was not a single one, but it took roots in different periods and parts of the subcontinent (Mangalam, 2014: 150). Historically, the *bhakti* movement, which started around the 6th century and became popular in the 15th and

[46] As a representative of Dalits at the Round Table Conference, Ambedkar was forced to make a decision concerning the separate electorates for Dalits and Gandhi's fast. He declared: "I responded to the call of humanity and saved the life of Mr. Gandhi by agreeing to alter the Communal Award in a manner satisfactory to Mr. Gandhi. This agreement is known as the Poona Pact" (Ambedkar, 2014a: 57). This pact was incorporated into the Government of India Act, in 1935. Under the pact, Ambedkar gave up his demand for separate electorates in favour of a system of primary and secondary elections that allowed separate electorates for Dalits in the primaries and a joint electorate in the general elections. Radical Dalits viewed the pact as a conspiracy to prevent Dalits from electing their true representatives, while facilitating the election of Congress-backed candidates (Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009: 38).

16th centuries, is the earliest known controversy over caste and gender structures in India.[47] According to Hindu thought and philosophy, *bhakti* focuses on the individual's ability to reach God outside the restrictions of the rigid caste system (Jatava, 1997). However, besides being an important religious and social movement that helped construct an identity in opposition to the Brahmin one, *bhakti*'s influence was not successful in ending India's internal weave of religious and political conflict since it attacked the caste system from a purely spiritual level (Zelliot, 2005).

The 'Adi' movements were also significant in the formation of the Dalit identity. Being aimed at the argument of the original inhabitants, these movements have a common tag, 'Adi',[48] which means precisely 'original inhabitant'. Gail Omvedt argues that the mobilisation of the oppressed and exploited sections of Indian society —such as peasants, Dalits, women and low castes— that Phule referred to as *shudras* and *adi-shudras* occurred on a large scale in the 1920s and 1930s (Omvedt, 2006: 34). Another prominent reformer was Jyothee Thass, who campaigned for Dalits' education and their social emancipation, and theorised the egalitarian Dravidian identity against 'anachronistic' Hinduism (Mani, 2005: 314).[49] Jyotirao Phule was a Maharashtrian activist, writer and anti-caste social reformer whose progressive thoughts and actions propelled all women's education in India.[50] He worked to abolish the caste system and untouchability in Maharashtra, and compared caste to slavery arguing that it is "as vicious and

[47] 'Bhakti' —from *Bhaj* in Sanskrit— means 'to revere'. It originated in the South and it appears to have drawn from diverse sources like Tamil literature and Buddhism as it evolved. The mystics who led the *bhakti* movement include low-caste individuals like Ramanand and Ravidass in the North, Chaitanya and Chandidasa in the East, Eknath, Choka Mela, Thukaram and Narsinh Mehta in the West and Ramanuja, Nimbaraka and Basava in the South. Although these individuals usually broke caste restrictions imposed upon Dalit communities —such as writing and reading— their social influence was limited to spiritualism proving the insufficiency of the *bhakti* mode regarding the emancipation of Dalits' socioeconomic problems (Teltumbde, 2017).

[48] Most Adi Dalit movements such as 'Adi-Dharma' in Punjab, 'Adi-Hindu' in Uttar Pradesh and Hyderabad, and 'Adi-Dravida', 'Adi-Andhra' and 'Adi-Karnataka' in south India have a common claim of the Dalits and the Shudras being the original inhabitants of India (Omvedt, 2006).

[49] A *Paraiyar* born in northern Tamil Nadu, Thass announced in 1886 that Dalits are not Hindus but actually have a Buddhist past. He established the "Dravida Mahajana Sabha" organisation in 1891 and called upon Dalits to register themselves as 'casteless Dravidians' in that year's census. It was he who termed the caste system as 'internal colonialism' within Indian society, and declared his preference for the British rule for its modernising prospects concerning education, science and industrialisation against the perpetuation of the casteist rule under the so-called *swaraj* (Teltumbde, 2017).

[50] In 1848, Phule, along with his wife, started the first school in India for Dalit girls following it up with another school for girls of all castes in 1851 (Deshpande, 2003). He also founded the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (Truth Seeking Society) in 1873 whereby he addressed overarching themes such as the character and unity of the labouring classes, the unequal division of labour between women of different castes, and the vital contribution of peasant women to production.

brutal as the enslavement of the Africans in the United States, but based in India not only on open conquest and subordination but also on deception and religious illusion" (Phule qtd. in Omvedt, 2006: 18).

In the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century the Indian subcontinent witnessed hectic political activity such as the rise of the Indian national movement. The leaders of the national movement downplayed minorities' social problems and arose single-mindedly in the pursuit of their political goal. Nonetheless, the introduction of new ideas and the development of new institutions in India by the British rulers meant a dynamic factor that led to introspection on the part of educated native élites, but also fostered the consolidation of a resistance against the caste system in India.[51] The foundation of the Dalit Panthers as the progeny of Marxist and Ambekdarite philosophies marked a new era for the Dalit body politics since, through their literary works and their body language of defiance and anger, they demonstrated a form of political communication that was decisive for the spread of the new-found Dalit identity.[52] The Dalit liberation movement spearheaded by Ambedkar in Maharashtra articulated their dissent against the dominant ideology, not only on social and political arenas, but also through literary forms.

This first generation of university-educated Dalit youth in Mumbai began to use writings as a platform to express protest against unjust social structures and put forward an alternative framework. The topics that came up for deliberation and discussion revolved around their

[51] Most nationalist historians chose to record only those aspects of the activities undergone across the country that directly opposed British rule. However, as G. Aloysius argues in his powerful analysis of the growth and trajectory of nationalism, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (1997), it was a period of freedom movement in a far more comprehensive sense. From the perspective of the lower castes, it was a period of struggle against both the British rule and the age-long Brahminical rule. Since the British conquest of India was considered nothing but an extension of colonialism actually started by Brahminism, the lower castes' project aimed to address both the socio-cultural and the political concerns stemming from them.

[52] The emergence of the Dalit Panther movement took place in a political and economic environment of growing disillusionment about promises of a better future made after Independence, and growing economic and social tensions. The spark that ignited the movement among young Dalit writers were numerous reports of atrocities committed against people belonging to Scheduled Caste groups in the early 1970s. The powerful intertwining of politics and literature was demonstrated by leading Dalit Panthers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle, and Daya Pawar, who, apart from being activists, were also fervent writers. Therefore, they also took inspiration from the resurgence of militant left-wing activity within India —Naxalism— to build and escalate their own struggle for freedom. Naxalism, born in the armed conflict between the peasants and landlords in a village called Naxalbari in West Bengal —from which it gained its name— is an offshoot of the communist movement in India. Inspired by the philosophy of Mao Zedong, Naxalites believe in armed struggle along the lines of the Maoist revolution in China. They tried to address the issue of caste and to make common cause with Dalits, but with little success.

experience of inequality and the injustice produced by casteist distinctions within the Indian community. The resulting output, which could not fit the norms of mainstream Marathi literature —completely hegemonised by upper castes— assumed a different identity for itself, framed within 'Dalit Literature'. This literature reflects the anger, frustration, alienation and desire to revolt of the downtrodden, and it describes the reality of Dalit life with an insight stemming from those who actually belonged to the community, laying bare first-hand experiences. Literature became thus an effective tool for Dalits in their urge to express their protest and anguish at the caste Hindus' domination, but it also represented a site for asserting resistance and affirming a distinct Dalit consciousness.[53]

Although the burgeoning of Dalit *sahitya*,[54] the literature that emerged from this transformative period in Maharashtra's politics, began in the 1970s —and in less than two decades this literary movement spread to other languages such as Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil— it actually dates back to the 11th century, when low-caste writer Madara Chennaiah wrote about the oppressive conditions of Dalits. However, what has been internationally said of subaltern writers can also be said to be true of Dalit authors in India: what is considered 'literary' or 'literature' in a given period is often determined by those who hold power. As such, mainstream Hindu culture has maintained for centuries a polemic patronage that systematically neglected and marginalised Dalit discourse, rendering Indian history one-sided and incomplete.

Dalit historians trace the history of the term 'Dalit literature' back to the first Dalit Literary Conference, in 1958. The conference discussed the corpus of Dalit literature and passed the following resolution, among others:

> The literature written by Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as 'Dalit Literature' and realizing its cultural importance, the universities and literary organizations should give it its proper place. (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018: 19)

[53] In this dissertation, the terms 'caste Hindus' and 'upper castes' are used interchangeably.

[54] Deeply identified with the neighbourhoods and working-class ethos of Mumbai, Dalit *sahitya* was defined by the often-sexualised language of the Mumbai slums and by a refiguration of literary Marathi (Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2009). Namdeo Dhasal's famous collection of poetry, *Golpitha* (1972) is an instance of Dalit *sahitya*'s character.

Even though the resolution restricted the field to Dalit literature written in Marathi, it opened the door to a definition of Dalit literature as being 'written by others about the Dalits'. This early formulation has been revised by many writers and critics such as Sharankumar Limbale who, in the beginning of his book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, defines Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale, 2004: 19). This strict definition is somewhat tempered a few pages later when Limbale admits that another perspective has lately become possible. He stresses that for a work to be called 'Dalit literature' it is not sufficient to be written by a Dalit writer; the subject matter and the consciousness underlying it are of the utmost importance (126). Taking Limbale's postulation as a basis, non-Dalit writers can also write Dalit literature as long as their adopted perspective is Dalit. As such, as many critics argue, Dalit literature is and should run parallel to the social movement and be a response to the socio-cultural forces that have shaped Indian society.

Through Dalit literature, the Dalit subaltern has now appeared in the literary field as a speaking subject whose speech and voice have acquired —through its heterogeneous and plurivocal character— a tone, language and style that is often at odds with the dominant literary voice. It coincides with the subaltern project of 're-reading and re-writing literature and history 'from below', formulating the idea of Dalit Studies as a critical location that allows the study of Dalits as marginalised subjects, and offering at the same time a perspective for reinterpreting Indian society and history. Having entered the stream, Dalit literature has not simply merged into it, but has actually changed it; it is both 'a part of' and yet 'apart from' it. This kind of counterstance —the assertion of a distinct literary-political identity as well as the introduction of a critical perspective on hitherto unquestioned elements— has been variously applied to include Dalit renderings of traditional genres such as poetry, autobiography, short and long fiction, and drama. Yet, given the socio-cultural nature of Dalit literary productions, they have frequently been extended to include a large body of informal publications such as political tracts, essays revolving around Ambedkar's persona, and journalistic reporting of incidents of violence and discrimination against Dalits that reconsider history, philosophy, politics and religion from a Dalit perspective.[55]

[55] For a discussion on the multiple levels of Dalit literary discourse and examples of Dalit pamphlet literature, see Badri Narayan and A. R. Misra's *Multiple Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writings* (2004).

The material of study used in this dissertation are socio-cultural representations created explicitly as literary texts by male and female authors from Dalit and non-Dalit standpoints so as to conduct a comparative examination of 'on' and 'from' Dalit perspectives. Most of the texts chosen are originally written in English although, given the particular socio-economic context of the Dalit community, many Dalit writers —especially those from the 20th century— did not have an easy access to English and used their regional dialects to put forth their experience, to be later on translated into English. Translations, although diluted, are nonetheless helpful and necessary testimonies in the recovery of Dalits' side of history and in the attempt to put as many pieces together as possible.

The main bases for my analysis are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Bama's *Karukku* (2014), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (2014 [1935]) and Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (2018), as some of the most representative texts of this ever-growing literary corpus, although several other autobiographical and fictional works will also complement the corpus of this study. This dissertation will delve into these texts as constructs of literary devices and practices that seek to record, explicate, expand and critique Indian realities as accessed by Dalits in pre- and post-independence India. Thus, apart from an examination of the authors' socio-political and cultural stances, the reason and the manner in which certain styles, registers and literary devices are employed, avoided or privileged will also be explored. This thesis will attempt to grasp the change and evolution in the representation of the Dalit community by analysing the diverse mechanisms and voices —speaking from different times and spaces— that add to the creation of a new canon that stands at par but is at the same time detached from Indian mainstream literature, mechanisms and voices that are in a constant process of definition and redefinition.

Chapter 1 will discuss the ontology of 'caste' and will provide an outline of the principle of casteism through Dalit and non-Dalit perspectives. Dalit 'Otherising' will be unfolded through an examination of its distinct layers, with an emphasis on intra-caste divisions and gendered casteism. Chapter 2 will review the most recurrent strategies that Dalits have used over the decades in their attempt to rid themselves of the stigma of untouchability, as well as the price they had to pay in each case. The rhetoric of Dalit suffering will be addressed by assessing the adequacy of mainstream trauma paradigms in Dalits' particular contexts, and the appropriate way of writing and reading Dalit suffering will also be considered. Chapter 3 will trace the literary representation of Dalits, from complete obliteration and marginalisation, to a partial

and conditioned portrayal from above, to finally building their own narrative voice and claiming a legitimate narrative space. In analysing the aesthetics of the constantly developing Dalit literature, this dissertation will also look for gaps in its fabric, such as gendered and social misrepresentations.

CHAPTER ONE

CONNECTING THE DOTS

In order to better understand how oppression in a complex society such as India functions, issues of power and domination need to be explored. By means of different perspectives and interpretations of the same events, literature can disclose realities that cannot be grasped from traditional and totalitarian historical accounts.

Tracing Casteism

Casteist Ontology

The caste structure in India has privileged the upper castes and disempowered the lower and outcaste populations through a form of social stratification of hierarchically arranged strata. One is ascribed to a stratum by descent, leaving no scope of individual capabilities, inclinations or choices. This has led to the establishment of a pair of opposing counterparts of upper and lower castes and to the creation of a 'purity/pollution' polarity in the Indian mindset. The most notorious corollary of this dualism is the conception of 'untouchability',[56] vested in the Dalit communities and their subsequent otherising.[57]

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[56] 'Untouchability' has often coincided with the notion of 'impurity', both in social and literary contexts, due to the fact that the ancient and highly influential Hindu religious text *Manusmriti* establishes several sources of impurity —such as birth, death, menstruation, occupation and gender (Bühler, 1886). However, the concept of 'untouchability' referred to under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution is theorised as distinct from the 'impurity' described in the *Manusmriti*: while untouchability is permanent, impurity is occasional —as soon as the duration of impurity is over or the stain is removed, no one is expected to observe it; untouchability is observed in respect of a whole caste, whereas impurity is more individualistic, irrespective of one's caste; finally, in Ambedkar's words, "while the impure as a class came into existence at the time of Dharma Sutras, the untouchables came into being much later than 400 A.D." (Ambedkar, 2003: xiv).

[57] The desire to define oneself by defining what one is not has been a powerful influence on the initiation and continuation of the caste system. Edward Saïd resorted to the theory of the Aryan invasion and the creation of an 'other' to explain the origin and creation of the caste structure in India (Saïd, 1978).

In analysing the tests compiled by the British commissioners for the identification of Dalits as a community, Ambedkar wrote:

> There is no legal definition of untouchability and there cannot be any. Untouchability does not express itself through the hair of the head or the colour of the skin. It is not a matter of blood. Untouchability expresses itself in modes of treatment and observance of certain practices. (2002: 336)

It is futile then to insist upon the application of uniform attributes of untouchability across different contexts as differences in practices do not indicate differences in the conditions of the 'untouchables'. Whether the pollution is caused by touch or the use of a common well, the notion underlying both is one and the same: "Both are outward registers of the inward feeling of defilement, odium, aversion and contempt" (Ambedkar, 2002: 336).

Considered as an outstanding writer for his vivid representation of Dalits in his novel *Untouchable* (2014), Mulk Raj Anand is a pioneer in attempting to provide a personal voice to the voiceless and downtrodden of India by presenting the storyline from their perspective. *Untouchable* is the story of a day in the life of Bakha, an eighteen-year-old *bhangi* (sweeper) who lives in the outcaste colony of an archetypical rural village in colonial India marked by a strong casteist sentiment. Anand portrays Bakha and the rest of Dalit characters suffering from constant casteist division and discrimination throughout the narrative. The experience that marks Bakha in a staggering way is his entry in the village, which causes him public shame and humiliation on account of his caste:

> 'Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!' he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. […] 'Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. […] You swine, you dog, why didn't you shout and warn me of your approach! Don't you know, you brute, that you must not touch me! […] This dirty dog bumped right into me! So unmindfully do these sons of bitches walk in the streets! He was walking along without the slightest effort at announcing his approach, the swine!' (Anand, 2014: 37-8)

The simple touch of a Dalit would contaminate the high castes' purity. Furthermore, Anand displays Dalits' capacity to pollute even without touching; their approach would suffice: "'The distance, the distance! […] A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it. We are ruined'" (51).

In her autobiographical novel *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) set in pre-independence Maharashtra, Baby Kamble presents a painful and realistic picture of her community's life, the Mahars, under the oppressive caste system, although she draws special attention to Dalit women's condition. She portrays the attachment of the concept of 'pollution' to the general Dalit corporeality, as their voice or their shadow could also defile:

> The yeskar Mahar had to carry with him a stick fitted at one end with a small bell. The reason for this was simple. If the men sitting down for their dinner heard the Mahar's voice, they would have to discard their meal and get up. But if they heard just the sound of his bell, they could finish their meal. His voice could pollute but not the sound of his bell! (Kamble, 2008: 65)

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is set in Ayemenem, a town in the southern state of Kerala in the 1960s. It centers around the wealthy, land-owning, Syrian Christian Ipe family. Although the focus of the story are the twins Estha and Rahel —who live with their mother Ammu, their grandmother Mammachi, their uncle Chacko, and their great-aunt Baby Kochamma— Roy depicts the interaction politics between the upper castes and the Dalit family bonded to them and composed by Velutha and his father, Vellya Paapen. Apart from having the duty to warn of their presence whenever in public, Roy describes the preventive measures that had to be taken by Dalits so as to avoid defiling the upper castes: "[Velutha] would bring them for Ammu, holding them out on his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn't have to touch him to take them" (Roy, 1997: 74). The upper castes, in turn, followed purifying rituals whenever necessary so as to 'clean' objects or themselves from the spread of Dalit impurity. When Vellya Paapen hands his crystal eye to Mammachi —Ammu's mother— as a sign of his appreciation and servility towards the upper-caste family before delivering the news about Velutha and Ammu's love affair, "She groped her way to the sink, and soaped away the sodden Paravan's eye-juices. She smelled her hands when she'd finished" (255). Anand also portrays this upper-caste purifying habit:

> Facing the shopkeeper with great humility, [Bakha] joined his hands and begged to know where he could put a coin to pay […]. The shopkeeper pointed to a spot on the board near him. Bakha put his anna there. The betel-leaf-seller dashed some water over it. […] Having thus purified it, he picked the nickel piece and threw it into the counter. Then he flung a packet of 'Red-Lamp' cigarettes at Bakha, as a butcher might throw a bone to an insistent dog. (Anand, 2014: 33)

Apart from sprinkling water, Anand mentions other economic measures taken to counterbalance the damage caused:

> Standing in a corner, [Bakha] stole a glance at the shop to see which was the cheapest thing he could buy. […] he knew they certainly could not be cheap, certainly not for him, because the shopkeepers always deceived the sweepers and the poor people, charging them much bigger prices, as if to compensate themselves for the pollution they courted by dealing with the outcastes. (36)

This indicates the high castes' profound anxiety concerning the pollution ritual necessary after having contact with 'contaminating entities' and their general loathing and prejudice towards Dalits: "a Paravan's coarse black hand […]. His black hips […]. His Paravan smell. *Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch on heat*" (Roy, 1997: 257-58; emphasis in the original). As Sara Dickey puts it, servants "represent the dirt, disease, and 'rubbish' of a disorderly outside world that employers commonly associate with the lower class and that pointedly contrast with the ideal cleanliness, order, and hygiene of their own homes" (Dickey, 2000: 462). This prejudice is instilled in the upper castes from an early age: "[the high-caste vendor] would give the innocent children lessons in social behaviour, '[…] can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance'" (Kamble, 2008: 13-14).

The dread of getting in contact with Dalits is the norm, except when personal and social interests indicate otherwise. When Bakha enters the town's Hindu temple so as to clean it, he is accused of diffusing pollution on it and on the worshippers inside. Even the Brahmin priest who has purposefully molested Bakha's sister, Sohini, earlier that day joins the general outcry and complains about being defiled by the girl, laying bare the plasticity and hypocrisy in

casteist practices: "'You people have only been polluted from a distance,' Bakha heard the little priest shriek. 'I have been defiled by contact'" (Anand, 2014: 51).

The strong sentiment of purity and pollution in the Indian society, as Ambedkar argues, has been informed by the Hindu religion.[58] Religion has constructed and deconstructed modes of power and discrimination in India, playing thus a decisive role in the life of marginalised people, such as Dalits. The Vedas, a pivotal part of the Hindu religious scriptures, preach caste and, by doing so, consecrate and justify it;[59] and since in ancient times the function of religion was the same as the function of law and government, Hinduism constituted a means by which control has been exercised over the conduct of individuals and social order has been maintained in India.

The recognition of caste divisions by the Hindu religion has had a bearing on many religious practices, such as the right to perform rituals. *Upanayana* or the metaphoric 'second birth', for instance, was initially a privileged entitlement for the first three *varnas* and denied to the fourth one on the argument that the Shudras have committed 'sins' or 'lowly deeds' in a previous life.[60] By an extension of the same logic, the Shudras were denied many other rituals, a phenomenon that rendered them 'ritually exiled', and destined them to engage in all manner of

[58] In "Away from the Hindus", a speech written after his decision to renounce Hinduism in 1936, Ambedkar described religion as having primarily social functions and purposes; rather than mediating between man and God, it primarily aimed at regulating the relations between men (Rodrigues, 2002: 7). Later on, in 1936, Ambedkar was invited to deliver the presidential address for the annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, an organisation dedicated to social reform. This conference was later cancelled as the leaders of the Mandal felt that the views on Hinduism expressed in the speech —provokingly entitled "Annihilation of Caste" (1945)— were difficult to accept. Ambedkar, however, refused to alter it. In this address, he was set to question the very basis of Hinduism by posing daunting remarks on the Vedas, and argued that caste —and as a result, 'untouchability'— was an inevitable outcome of Hinduism. He argued: "People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste" (Ambedkar, 1945: 46-7).

[59] Hindu religious scriptures fall into three distinct categories: the Vedas, the Shastras, and the Puranas. The Vedas were regarded as the highest and were also referred to as *Shruti* or the 'word of God' heard by or revealed to the man. Max Müller argues that, contrary to a 'bookless religion', a 'book religion' creates the impression that its commandments are true as the book serves as a voucher. Such is the case of Hinduism and his reinforcement in the dictates of the Vedas. He adds that the social significance of a religion with a book lies in the fact that it manages to control the mind of the people by giving authority to the ideas included in it and inducing willing obedience in the people. As such, the Vedas have automatically granted casteism and untouchability the authority of a written book and the sanctity of the divine word (Ambedkar, 2017: 51-2).

[60] This practice crept in later, in times when post-Vedic Indian society started reading the metaphoric as being literal, and provided religious rites of initiation such as this with justifications (Ambedkar, 1970: 242).

'impure' work in their present life.[61] Given the theoretical impossibility of their rebirth, they could be despised as being less than human and, therefore, at par with animals. Moreover, they could be treated as such without any fear on the part of perpetrators to gain any spiritual demerits. As scriptural authority was translated into social and legal practices, the argument of Dalits' 'untouchability' was permanently closed in India.

Baburao Bagul, in his collection of short stories titled *When I Hid My Caste* (2018), centres on the lives of people the caste system meant to erase: the Dalits. In capturing different contexts through different characters —rebellious youth, migrants, sex workers, street vendors, slum-dwellers and gangsters— he uncloaks the nuanced casteism vested upon this community. One of the aspects he tackles is the prominent role of religion in the caste question. In his short story "Bohada" Damu, the Dalit protagonist, asks to perform a dance in the village festival, but his request horrifies the upper-caste villagers: "'We should listen? To this pretence, this arrogance… to this haughtiness? This irreligiousness? No, friends, this will never happen'" (Bagul, 2018: 22). Such boldness heavily affects the overall social fabric of the village: "The peace of the village began to stagger around as if it had been bitten by a scorpion" (19).

Anand also shows the strong correlation between religious attitudes and casteism. He contrasts the treatment that a Dalit and a *sadhu*, a Hindu ascetic monk,[62] receive from caste Hindus. *Sadhus* spend most of their days begging on the streets for food and money in exchange of their blessings. On account of their social degradation and limited sources of livelihood, many Dalits are also constrained to beg for food or money. Yet, despite the similarity between the two figures, Hindus' double standard are displayed when Bakha coincides with a *sadhu* at the doorstep of an upper-caste Hindu housewife, while they both beg for food. The woman treats the *sadhu* in a respectful and compassionate manner, albeit to benefit her own needs: "please accept this, the house is all right; [Bakha] didn't really pollute it" (Anand, 2014: 73). When it comes to Bakha, the 'good deed' towards him is preceded by verbal abuse: "May you

[61] Ambedkar advocates for the idea that pollution originated in priestly ceremonialism and in the general Hindu belief in purity. He claims that the caste system has undoubtedly consolidated the institution of untouchability by enforcing several disabilities and restrictions on certain social groups under the fictitious belief of 'purity'. He believes that, although separate in their inception, caste and untouchability are intertwined with each other up to the point that one cannot safely bifurcate them (Ambedkar, 2003).

[62] A *sadhu* is dedicated to achieving *moksa* (liberation), or the fourth and final *asrama* (stage of life), through meditation and contemplation. A *sadhu* is typically shirtless and wears an ochre-coloured *dhoti* and his hair is untamed and long, alluding to the idea of a wandering monk. Many Hindus believe that the austere practices of *sadhus* help burn off their karma and, thus, see them as benefiting society (Melton, 2008: 282-84).

die…what have you done to earn your food to-day, you or your sister? She never cleaned the lane this morning and you have defiled my home" (73).

The authority of Hindu religion is embedded in the Indian mindset to such a point that Dalits themselves have ended up accepting its sanctity:

> 'No, no,' said Lakha [Bakha's father]. 'They are really kind. We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.' He had never throughout his narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate. (70)

The pervasive nature of Hindu religion and its power of transmission is manifested by Anand especially through the symbol of the temple. When Bakha headed towards the temple to perform his duty as a sweeper, "[his] eyes caught sight of the magnificent sculptures […]. They seemed vast and fearful and oppressive. He was cowed back. The sense of fear came creeping into him" (53). Kamble, however, takes a more direct stand and bluntly accuses Hinduism of its contribution to the perpetuation of Dalits' subjugation: "Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible" (Kamble, 2008: 18). She ponders: "What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is!" (56).

Endogamous Configuration

The pollution/purity sentiment and the notion of untouchability have created a sharp hierarchical and inter-caste division in the Indian society. In order to preserve one's hierarchy and purity, fixed livelihood of each caste group has been developed and imposed in terms of practices, conditions, relations and duties. Thorat (2008) described this as the phenomenon of 'fixation of rights' and Ambedkar explained it as follows:

> The Touchables or Untouchables are in no sense individuals because all or nearly all of their relationships are fixed when they are born in a certain group. Their occupation, their dwelling, their gods and their politics are all determined for them by the group to which they belong. […] The relationship between the two […] has

> been fixed. It has become a matter of status […] giving the Untouchables a position of inferiority vis-a-vis the Touchables […] embodied in a code of social conduct to which the Untouchables must conform. (Ambedkar, 2017: 185)

As a relational phenomenon, untouchability also indicates the appropriate affective ties between upper and lower castes. In order to preserve a group's purity and hierarchy, Hindu communities have for a long time been caste-endogamous. Contact or mobility between castes have been restricted and any transgression would lead to retribution. As a matter of fact, although children usually acquire the legal and social status of the father in patriarchal societies, this is not always the case in inter-caste unions in India. This endangered respectability of their children or themselves inevitably reinforces upper castes' hesitation towards inter-caste relations, especially in the case of women. Baburao Bagul puts this sentiment forth in one of his short stories, in which an upper-caste would rather bear the brunt of being a single woman, with limited income and safety, than being linked to a Dalit:

> He would sit by her for a while and then go away. That frightened her even more but she could not hold him there. […] since he was not of her caste, this seemed to her to be a sin. […] 'I'm here for you, Chandra. Now I don't want to wait. I'll give you whatever you ask for, I'll out it all in your name: my provident fund, my salary, my home, my land, everything. You'll be a queen.' This pretty speech did not fill her heart with happiness. Instead it made it thump with rage. But she kept control of her voice and said with feigned ignorance, 'Kisanrao, what's your caste?' (Bagul, 2018: 84-5)

Casteist endogamy was, thus, deeply ingrained in the Indian society. In *The God of Small Things* the consequences of exogamy have a somatic effect, as it leads to health and psychological issues. After dreaming about the Dalit Velutha, Ammu wakes up and looks at her reflection in the mirror, worrying that she might have gotten mad (Roy, 1997: 223). This, according to Roy, points to the heavy price one has to pay for infringing the pre-established 'Love Laws' which "lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (177). The entity that buttresses these 'Love Laws' and determines the forbidden nature of exogamous relationships is the family, which proves to be a powerful private institution in India that emphasises the collective character of caste rather than individual as an identity marker.

Apart from endogamous romantic relations, inter-dining —or the exchange of food and beverages beyond caste borders— has also become a menace for one's purity. This is especially so on a local level, in villages and small towns, where familiarity reigns. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that food takers are generally considered to be lower and less pure than food givers. Accepting food from another caste would then be seen as an affirmation of one's lower caste status. Moreover, to take food or drinks from castes that are in a lower social rank would put higher castes in the danger of being polluted: "Brother, one can eat mud with a caste brother, but one shouldn't attend a feast with someone of a lower caste" (Bagul, 2018: 118). This is particularly manifested in the handling of food leftovers called *joothan*;[63] serving them to someone else, or knowingly accepting them, shows both inferiority and dependence (Malinar, 2010). In his autobiography with the same title, Omprakash Valmiki evinces the significance of begging for *joothan* for Dalits, and lays bare the humiliation and psychological and physical pain he and his community have experienced every time they were forced to ask for it (Valmiki, 2003).

Conversely, even the slightest consent to share food or beverages, be it contemptuously and condescendingly, was perceived by Dalits as an honour:

> 'Get that pan from which the sparrows drink water,' [Havildar Charat Singh] said to Bakha […]. 'Pour out the water from it.' […] To [Bakha's] great surprise Charat Singh got up and began to pour tea out of his tumbler into the pan. 'Drink it, drink it, my son.' 'I am very grateful, Havildar ji,' said Bakha. (Anand, 2014: 93-4)

The second reason behind this type of commensality restrictions is that the Hindu principle of vegetarianism as a superior ethic has been traditionally enmeshed with values of non-violence. Apart from establishing what one should consume, this principle has also tabooed several practices, such as beef-eating (Singh, 1995). In the casteist discourse, beef or meat-eating in general has been associated with violence, impurity, and immorality, converting food in

[63] Valmiki explains the etymology of the word *joothan* as follows: "The Hindi word *jūṭhan* literally means food left on a plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middleclass urban home. However, such food would be characterized *jūṭhan* only if someone else were to eat it. The word carries the connotations of ritual purity and pollution, because *jūṭha* means polluted. […] The term actually carries a lot of historical baggage. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi advised untouchables to stop accepting *jūṭhan*" (Valmiki, 2003: xxxix).

another marker of hierarchy and caste.[64] This demonstrates that even something as basic as food has been governed by a power narrative, revealing the link between casteist discrimination and experiences of eating —or hunger in the case of Dalits. Because of the poverty and inequality impinged upon them, food has represented for many Dalit families a perpetual struggle, which have often left them no other option but to beg for food or to content themselves with what they could scavenge:

> So we learnt to eat whatever was given to us without complaining. We could not say 'I'm not hungry now; I'll eat it later' for the simple reason that one could never be sure whether any food would be left over to eat later. (Pawar, 2008: 95)

Y. B. Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* frequently illustrates Dalits' utter poverty and their reliance on waste, such as carrion:

> In those days, there were many occasions when cows, buffaloes and other cattle fell victim to speeding trains. The stationmaster would, at such times, depend upon the untouchable employees to remove the carcass from the rail tracks, for no caste Hindu would touch the dead animal. The untouchables saw it as an opportunity to get some meat. The dead animal was carried into the railway quarters. A group of people surrounded the carcass —women, children and men, all untouchables. (Satyanarayana, 2011: 75)

Narendra Jadhav in *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India* attests to this reality and stresses that, when the word came in his village of dead cattle or sheep, it converted them in special and celebratory occasions: "That was the most longed for news. Then we would all excitedly rush to grab the best cuts of meat" (Jadhav, 2005: 72). *The Prisons We Broke* also underscores Dalits' daily starvation. Kamble describes the importance of food in their lives, the consequences of its lack, and the meaning of the

[64] Ambedkar framed the close relation between food and untouchability within the connection between Buddhism and Hinduism in his famous theory of the 'Broken Men'. He draws in it a historical account of the contestation for supremacy between the Hindus and the Buddhists and argues that, even though the Hindus felt contempt for the Buddhists in general, it was the fact that the 'broken people' continued to eat beef which transformed their hatred into the practice of untouchability (Ambedkar, 2003).

celebratory month of Ashadh as the time of the year when "The sweet food pacified their ever hungry, burning stomachs at least once during the whole year" (Kamble, 2008: 28).

Mapping Casteism

Parallel to controlling social interactions, the casteist ideology has also ensured differentialism in Indian society based on spatial criteria, by dictating a strict partitioning of space between upper and lower castes. This has been particularly in force in rural areas, as Dalit settlements have often been relegated to the periphery of the village, being thus physically segregated from the 'touchable' communities. In fact, the Dalit critic Sharankumar Limbale includes in his definition of the Dalit community "all those living outside the boundary of the village" (Limbale, 2004: 30).

In *Untouchable*, Anand describes the outcastes' colony as "a group of mud-walled houses […] clustered together […] under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them" (Anand, 2014: 3). His description is loaded with sensorial impressions: he emphasises the visual breach between the world of sun, lovely patterns, roofs and flower pots, and the world of refuse and thatched huts surrounded by marshlands, what he calls the "waste land of the sweeper's lane" (101). Bakha is aware of an olfactory contrast between the two territories: "Where the lane leading to the outcastes' street […] finished, [Bakha] sniffed at the clean, fresh air […] and vaguely sensed a difference between the odorous, smoky world of refuse and the open, radiant world of the sun" (25). Kamble also remarks an evident spatial division in the Indian society. She highlights that the Mahars were forced to live in "dirt pits on the periphery of the village, like discarded rags, ignored by society" (Kamble, 2008: 35). Apart from the physical division, she also describes the chest-high platform that the higher castes' homes used to have so as to prevent Dalits from approaching, and thus polluting their homes (54). *My Father Baliah* provides the casteist logic for this arrangement:

> Most villages in India have for centuries had the same composition. A village has the perfect Hindu caste set-up with all the characteristic features codified by Manu. It has two types of dwellings, *varna* houses and *avarna* huts, separated by either a boundary or a well-maintained distance. In order to avoid pollution (from the

casteless untouchables) through wind to caste Hindus, the houses of each *varna* (caste) are built in such a way that the wind blows from the dwellings of the Brahmins to the rest of the village. Untouchable (*avarna*) houses are located in the east and the main village in the west, since the wind always blows from west to east. Houses are built in ascending order of the caste hierarchy from east to west. (Satyanarayana, 2011: xiv-v; emphasis in the original)

The geography of caste politics, and the subsequent connection between space and power, is also laid bare in *The God of Small Things,* which showcases the reduced number of social spaces that allow for a prolonged contact between members of divergent castes. Velutha and his family live in a thatched hut made of mud and sticks, with a dark atmosphere inside, and separated from the upper castes by a 'natural' and ancient barrier, the river. Roy implies by this that each caste group is historically assigned a particular territory, and trespassing those limits is not allowed —except when it is in the high castes' interest:

Mammachi didn't encourage [Velutha] to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan. (Roy, 1997: 77)

Mary Louise Pratt (1992) in fact argues that bourgeois domestic spaces have functioned as the most significant 'zone of contact' for polarised social classes in India. Yet, despite enabling contact, this is not devoid of limitations, and casteist prejudices certainly do not wither in private spaces —more often than not, they become even blunter. In Roy's novel, for instance, Velutha and his family only have direct contact with the upper castes in the latter's house. Even so, the time they spend inside is not free of consequences. When Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, resolves to warn Mammachi of his son and Ammu's affair, he initially does not dare to step into the kitchen because of the repercussion his infringement might cause. When he finally gathers enough courage and steps forward, "Kochu Maria gave Vellya Paapen an old kitchen cloth to wipe himself with, and said nothing when he stood on the topmost step, almost inside her Touchable kitchen" (Roy, 1997: 255).

This particular cultural geography of the Indian setting has played a significant role in the perpetuation of social inequality, especially in rural areas. Apart from impeding the sharing of

spaces or even the proximity between distinct castes, it unwaveringly assigned the lowliest and least desirable areas to Dalits; their dwellings were usually devoid of basic resources and closer to the most polluted zones. In his anthropological study *The Untouchables of India*, Robert Deliège tackles the transcendence of the stigma of untouchability to all spheres of life and emphasises the effect it has had, especially in the access to water:

> After the various religious prohibitions, the ban on taking water from the village well is another important test of untouchability. Normally Untouchables did not have their own well; their women had to wait near the village well until some high-caste person deigned to draw some water and put it into their bucket. Elsewhere, Untouchables were not even allowed near the well. Furthermore, their material (bucket and rope) could not be lowered into a high-caste well, not even by a high-caste person. Today the ban on taking water from wells is still widespread; but in many villages, the Untouchables now have their own well, although it is often not nearly as deep as the main well, where they do not have the right to draw water. Although not universal, the prohibition on using village wells is nevertheless still extremely common, and is often just as strictly enforced as in the past. Were they to use high-caste wells […], Untouchables would dangerously contaminate the water, and with it, all the communities in the village. Any Untouchable who ventured to violate this rule would risk a thrashing. (Deliège, 1999: 95)

As Deliège indicates, the right to access sources such as water has been correlated in India to one's caste status, and the logic of caste and pollution has denied this right to Dalits. After performing his duties of sweeping the town's streets, Bakha lights a fire with the straw he picked up, and the warmth emanating from the fire empowers his worn-out body. This power quickly fades away when he approaches the village well in order to get water, and is struck again by reality: "For a moment he stood defeated where he had bent down to the pitcher" (Anand, 2014: 15). Dalits' daily ordeal in accessing water is emphasised in *Untouchable*:

> The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of the three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the nearby brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. They had no well of their own because it cost at least a thousand rupees […]. Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the

> caste Hindu's well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. […] the outcastes had to wait for chance to bring some caste Hindu to the well, for luck to decide that he was kind, for Fate to ordain that he had time […]. They crowded round the well, joining their hands with servile humility to every passer-by, cursing their fate, and bemoaning their lot, if they were refused the help they wanted, praying, beseeching and blessing, if some generous soul condescended to listen to them, or to help them. (15-16)

This obstacle was extrapolated to all social spheres, thus conditioning Dalits' equal access to any other shared resources such as temples, schools or hospitals. Bagul depicts the culture of intimidation exerted in the context of Hindu sacred places so as to dispel Dalits from polluting them: "On the steps in front of the temple, the village folks sat, and the Untouchables were in the open maidan, where they endured the warm love of last rays of the setting sun" (Bagul, 2018: 51). Jadhav in *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India* also complains that Dalits were never allowed into the upper-caste temple as it was believed that even their shadows would pollute it. They were forced to pray outside of it and to stand as far away as possible so as to "avoid conflicts" (Jadhav, 2005: 53). The dependence on common sources and the imposed distance have increased Dalits' vulnerability, workload, as well as their general inequality (Tiwari & Phansalkar, 2007: 53-61).

This physical apartheid has been used as a prominent method whereby discrimination has been practiced and enhanced, especially in rural milieus, so as to create a visible bridge of untouchability. Even if there were no tangible obstacles to prevent Dalits from relocating into the upper-caste territory, there was always a force lurking over them: "[Bakha] realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, […] but a moral one" (Anand, 2014: 38-9). The erasure of Dalits' entitlement to common sources and spaces has enacted the othering of the 'Dalit being' and has entailed the symbolic expropriation of their humanity. In Roy's novel the difference between 'touchables' and 'untouchables' is highlighted through the existence of separate spaces, such as a school especially built for the latter group by the Ipe family's great-grandfather as another method to preserve their purity (Roy, 1997: 13).

Lévi-Strauss (1967) contends that the mind requires order, and this is achieved by discriminating and placing everything of which the mind is aware in a secure 'refindable' place, therefore allocating each element a role to play in the economy of objects and identities that

constitute an environment. Saïd reflects that this economy of objects is a universal practice whereby we designate in our mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond which is 'theirs'. This is a way of constructing geographical distinctions that, he argues, "*can be* [an] entirely arbitrary […] imaginative geography of the 'our land-barbarian land'", but whose result is that both "their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours'" (Saïd, 2003: 54; emphasis in the original). Gaston Bachelard (1964) refers to this as the 'Poetics of Space'.

In response to Gandhi's idealisation of the Indian rural setting, Ambedkar was categorical that the village was "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, [and] narrow-mindedness" (Ambedkar, 2010: 176). In *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables* (2003), Ambedkar explicitly referred to the question of space in India as a social separation and a stoppage of social intercourse. He defined it as 'territorial segregation' and described it as "a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire, into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto" (266). He was alert to the social construction of space and considered social relations, especially untouchability, as an obvious and dangerous mode of organising spaces. In fact, he proposed that it was the proximity between 'touchables' and 'untouchables' that has led the upper castes to introduce social segregation.

Pre-established Vocation

The formative role of the Indian caste system and the ideological inheritances from Hinduism have also configured pre-ordained responsibilities and occupations in India. The central value of this cultural formation is called 'officium' (Blair, 1987) or 'duty'. Officium indicates that an individual has the responsibility to perform the functions into which that person has been born, to the best of the individual's ability. This implies that one cannot choose which role to play, but s/he must play whatever role has been tendered. According to this notion of officium, the primary duty one owes is to the state, or in this case, Hinduism; and, since Hinduism has used the Indian state to implement law and civilisation, performing one's duty has been considered a religious act (Shanti, 1995). Referred to as 'the occupational theory', occupational restrictions have been attributed to untouchable communities on account of their connection with impurity and overall unclean status (Fernando, 2001). The so-called 'unclean' tasks

bestowed upon them are usually associated with death, human bodily waste, leatherwork, handling animal carcasses, cleaning streets, latrines and sewers, and scavenging (Shah et al, 2006: 106).

Being born under the yoke of the caste system means being deprived of free will and choice and, among many other aspects, being tied to an imposed profession. In Bakha's case,

> Though he had the receptivity of the man who is willing to lend his senses to experience, he had an unenlightened will. Heredity had furrowed no deep grooves in his soul [...]. The cumulative influence of careful selection had imprisoned his free will in the shackles of slavery to the dreary routine of one occupational environment. He could not reach out from the narrow and limited personality he had inherited to his larger yearning. It was a discord between person and circumstance by which a lion like him lay enmeshed in a net while many a common criminal wore a rajah's crown. [...] But it wanted the force and vivacity of thought to transmute his vague sense into the superior instinct of the really civilized man. (Anand, 2014: 81)

Among the eclectic nature of Dalit castes, the Mahar caste is the largest in the state of Maharashtra. Traditionally, the Mahars were considered to be inferior village servants whose primary duty came to be known as *Yeskar* duty.[65] This duty was actually contemplated as a birth right, performed on a rotation basis by every Mahar family in a village, and compensated through small amounts of land, known as *watan*, and in the form of *baluta* —entitlements in kind, such as grain and the meat and skin of dead cattle. These Dalits were consequently called *balutedars* who, although not remunerated for their labour, had a share in all the produce of the village (Bagul, 2018: 52). However, these so-called 'rights' of *Yeskars* were nothing more than a *de facto* right to begging and a claim to the clothing of the dead.

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[65] *Yeskar* or *Veskar* means 'one who protects the door gate at the village boundary'. Every Mahar had to perform the duty of *Yeskar* in turns, including inquiring visitors and informing the *Patil* (village headman) of their arrival, protecting the village day and night and investigating criminals, collecting revenue from the residents, passing messages, and making public announcements. Apart from their *Yeskar* duties, they also had to act like a *Jaagla*, or the village watchman. This consisted in being part of the village police administration, thus helping the *Patil* in legal matters, investigating robberies, serving government officers, giving witness in disputes related to land, and carrying revenue to the *Tehsil* office (Rao, 2009).

Jadhav narrates that when the *mamledar*, a senior revenue official, visited his family's village on a routine inspection, his father Dammu had to herald his arrival. After finishing this task as part of his *Yeskar* duty and while heading home, a policeman came looking for him so as to inform him of his next duty, which consisted in watching over a dead body:

> 'Eh, Damu Mahar, I have been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been wandering, you son of a bitch? […] You will sit guarding the body till the fauzdar and the police party come to inspect the scene and write a report,' the constable ordered. […] 'Remember, if anything happens to the corpse, your body too will end up in the well.' (Jadhav, 2005: 35)

Another duty assigned to Dalits was performing *mehtar.*[66] Bagul's short story "Revolt" focuses on young Jaichand who, influenced by Ambedkar's ideas, opposes his parents' determination to make him work as a manual scavenger. While they want him to take over the family's traditional occupation so as to financially support them and to "dispel the white collar dreams his son had been nurturing" (Bagul, 2018: 90), Jaichand is adamant on his decision of breaking with the family tradition and finishing his education instead. When Jaichand finally concedes to take a job at a local factory, presuming that his superior knowledge would be taken into account, his supervisor mockingly bypasses his educational background and sharply indicates the special position saved for members of his caste:

> 'Yes, a cart. They asked for a mehtar's job […]. When someone joins as a mehtar, they start with a cart,' said the boss […]. 'He's studying for his Matric…' 'Let him. But he's a mehtar. And he's here to be a mehtar. Go.' The boss had nothing more to say to Bhani [the mother]. The educated children of Bhangis often came for jobs, impelled by their destitution. When they were faced with the terrible, demeaning work of the cart, they ran away […]. (97-8)

[66] *Mehtar* is both a caste descriptor and an occupation in sanitation, and the two are used interchangeably. According to *The Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces of India* by R. V. Russell, "The sweeper's calling is well-defined and under the generic term of Mehtar are included members of two or three distinct castes, as Dom, Bhangi and Chuhra; the word Mehtar means a prince or headman, and it is believed that its application to the sweeper by the other servants is ironical. It has now, however, been generally adopted as a caste name" (Russell, 2019: 217). The *Mehtar* were listed as a Scheduled Caste under the Indian Constitution in 1950.

Such polluting duties forced upon Dalits added another trait to their condition, namely, the identification of Dalit *jatis* with a prescribed degrading occupation, an aspect that became central to understanding the position, status, and history of their members. Such an understanding of Indian society was undoubtedly complemented by Brahminical textual sources like the *Manusmriti*. Colonial officials and ethnographers systematically conceptualised the occupational perspective through the census survey volumes and the Caste and Tribe series from the late 19th century. The census classificatory tables —with Brahmins at the top and Dalits at the bottom— envisioned a sociologically 'perfect set-up' of Indian society.[67] Thus, colonial administrative and ethnographic analytic categories strengthened the Hindu ritual binary of purity and pollution sanctioned by the Hindu Shastras, and associated each community with specific impure occupations, a phenomenon which subsequently informed anthropological texts and literary productions in the 20th century.

This predetermined character of Dalits' professions is displayed by Roy as neither Vellyya Paapen nor Velutha have other options but to follow their forefathers' footsteps and perform the same degrading labours, one generation to the next. They are forced into bonded labouring, perpetually tied to a high caste family for economic reasons: "Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (Roy, 1997: 75). According to the prevalent social logic, Velutha should have inherited his father's unskilled profession: "Velutha wasn't supposed to be a carpenter. […] His father, Vellya Paapen, was a Paravan. A toddy tapper" (73). But because of the high-caste family's bounty, he was able to learn the trade of carpentry. In fact, Velutha is first mentioned in the novel at Sophie Mol's —the twins', Estha and Rahel, English cousin— funeral. Rahel reflects on Velutha's suitability and 'natural' abilities as 'a low caste' to perform such troublesome task as painting the church dome on account of his physical characteristics (6), thus pointing to a casteist predisposition to carry out certain tasks.

Roy stresses the idea that the inferiority instilled on Dalits is pre-established and unavoidable. There is no escape from history and its rules, especially not for the socially downtrodden as

[67] The Indian censuses of 1901 and 1911 and the provincial Caste and Tribe volumes included myths of origin of Dalit *jatis* as an explanation of their impure status —one of those explanations being polluting marital alliances between two different caste groups. Such explanations were based on Brahminical sources and were reinforced by local caste-Hindu élites, proving that the Hindu textual understanding of the caste system and *varna* classification of the Indian society and untouchability reinforced the supposed Indian secular social structure (Cohn, 1987).

Velutha, whom Roy portrays as "History walking the dog" (288). If one dared to defy history by failing or refusing to abide by its rules, serious repercussions awaited the individual, and his or her family or community:

> Sometimes an entire village community was ostracized as punishment […]. The number of years of ostracism depended on the gravity of the offense. They were made outcasts among outcasts. They were not allowed to mingle or even eat together with the rest of the Mahars. No one would marry a girl from such a village, and no one would let their daughter marry into that village. There was to be no social interaction, no communication with the ostracized Mahars. (Jadhav, 2005: 81)

Apart from the obligation to carry out revolting activities, Dalits' involvement in them has transformed them into objects of revulsion. In other words, by ensuring the purity of upper castes, they have become impure in the process. Upper-caste Hindus' obsessive preoccupation with purity and cleanliness, and the aversion they developed towards lower castes, can be read, according to Sharankumar Limbale (2004), in terms of the popular psychological framework of 'desire and taboo' employed by postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1986), Homi Bhabha (1994) and Robert Young (1995). This connection should be done with caution, however, since the shape and nature of Dalits' subalternity is different from that produced by the colonial framework inasmuch as it is inherited from birth and sanctioned by sacred authority, thus rendering it an eternal and unalterable nature.

Bagul signals Dalits' role in the preservation of upper castes' purity and superiority. In the description of a village festival, Bagul emphasises a traditional rite in which Dalit youths serve as assistants in charge of the most dangerous parts. They must agitate an inebriated bull so as to, later on, take control of him and facilitate the Patil's task of eventually killing the animal:

> Last year, the same thing had happened. The enraged bull had taken four Mahars down in this very manner and according to tradition, Rakhma Patil [an upper caste] had claimed the bull and the sacrifice, hitting it on its forehead and symbolically shaming the Mahars too. […] In the door of his home, he [the Patil] stopped to strike a pose, the pose of a man who has encountered death and fought it and

> returned. And his wife came out with an aarti thali and saluted his great victory. (Bagul, 2018: 60-1)

In *Untouchable*, Dalits' socially constructed connection to pollution is also laid bare which, Anand argues, stems from their imposed profession. As Bakha reckons, "They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt" (Anand, 2014: 67). In the Afterword to the novel, E. M. Forster comments on this:

> Indians […] have evolved a hideous nightmare unknown to the west: the belief that the products are ritually unclean as well as physically unpleasant, and that those who carry them away or otherwise help to dispose of them are outcastes from society. […] Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. (Forster, 2014: 142)

Ambedkar aligns casteist politics, especially the casteist division of labour, with the Hindus perceived loss —or the threat of it— of dignity. He implies that the configuration of the caste system was a way of preserving their status, a weapon against intrusions such as those of the so-called lower castes. In "Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto" (2014c), Ambedkar accuses the Hindu social order of being an unequal and unjust division of labour which reserves clean and respectable jobs for the Hindus and assigns the 'dirty' ones for the lower communities. To put it differently, it "clothes the Hindus with dignity and heaps ignominy upon the Untouchables" (Ambedkar, 2014b: 258). Dignity, in Ambedkar's reading of Manu and Hindu history, is the self-recognition demanding the other's recognition. In his famous critique of the caste system as a division of labourers rather than labour, he was pointing to the intrinsic link between identity reification and the larger issue of dignity. The division of labourers he spoke of is, in effect, the Hindu social organisation that earmarks certain bodies as destined only for certain types of labour. A naturalisation of the association between certain bodies and certain forms of labour is effected in the Indian social organisation, as almost every text that tackles the Dalit condition documents.

Taking a cue from the Hindu traditional definitions of dignity, a Dalit who uncomplainingly performs his or her assigned labour is dignified. If s/he sticks to his or her pre-destined and undignified work with no intention of abandoning it, then s/he is granted dignity. Conversely, when an individual refuses to fit into the place 'assigned' for him or her within this functionally

differentiated order, say through social or professional mobility, it is deemed that s/he may lose his or her dignity or may have his or her dignity violently taken away. The battle for equality is then a battle for fluidity across differentiation. Therefore, the organisation of the concept of dignity around caste-determined labour is what fits Dalits into hierarchies of social dignity, an arrangement that ironically renders them undignified as human beings.

Bagul's "Revolt" documents Jhai's anger at the prospect of losing his dignity on account of performing a lowly duty attributed to him at birth. Nevertheless, it also displays his outrage over his parents' conviction of acquiring dignity by means of performing one's ordained duties:

> 'Just for this I should become a Bhangi? Give up my education to clear up the dirt of the village? Carry filth on my head? If you wanted me to do that kind of work, why did you have me educated? Why did you let them light these lamps of independence, knowledge and humanity inside my mind?' […] 'But you are the son of a Bhangi. What problem can you have with doing this job? People pay to get these jobs, hundred, even a hundred-and-fifty rupees. And here you're getting one free.' […] 'Where is it written that a Bhangi's son must become a Bhangi?' 'In our poverty. In our dharma. In our country.' (Bagul, 2018: 92-3)

The rhetoric of the individual and communal labouring body is at the heart of many texts dealing with the Dalit condition. It functions as a trope for unnameable and unending suffering caused by an unequal economic context and social order both in pre- and post-independent India. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble angrily claims that it is the labour carried out by Dalits that sustains the village and the upper-caste households: "It's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy —it is the very life blood of the Mahars! […] Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars" (Kamble, 2008: 56). Bama has a similar perception in *Karukku*, noting she has grown up surrounded by hard-working 'bonded labourers': "At home, my mother and my grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest. And to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour" (Bama, 2014: 48). When labour is forced upon Dalits by ancient forms of structural inequalities —as both Bama's and Kamble's narrations evidence— labour becomes a marker of oppression rather than dignity. Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki adds:

> [t]his was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind. […] Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. (Valmiki, 2003: 85)

Nevertheless, the historical explanation for the institution of caste as originally a system of occupational categories, as claimed by figures such as Gandhi (Zelliot, 2005: 154),[68] has been recently dismissed and challenged by new anthropological studies based on extensive ethnographic field work. These studies that began in the 1960s argue that some *jatis* never had any traditional occupation associated with them, and even among those who did, many carried out various different tasks or relied as much on other occupations for their livelihood. In short, the idea that *jatis* are primarily occupational groups does not represent a sufficient description of the realities on the ground. Further, economical transitions in the post-colonial context have rendered many traditional occupations obsolete, and have led to the creative reinvention or renewed appropriation of others (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998: 7-8). Among the first to address this issue was Ambedkar; he disagreed with the view that traditional occupations were the original cause of untouchability and argued that, despite being prevalent in all human societies, no caste system has resulted elsewhere in the world (Ambedkar, 2003). Therefore, while occupational status remains an integral component in defining untouchability from a social perspective, its role as the primary catalyst for the creation of the caste system is greatly disputed.

[68] Gandhi wrote in his newspaper, *Harijan*, that "one born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes" (Gandhi qtd. in Zelliot, 2005: 154). While opposing the evils of untouchability and casteist discrimination, Gandhi upheld that Indian society should be organised according to the *varna* scheme and duties should be assigned on the basis of birth. In fact, despite the degrading impact that tasks such as manual scavenging or the handling of dead people and animals have on Dalits, Gandhi praised the potency of this image —in particular, the image of scavengers collecting human excreta with their bare hands and carrying the waste in baskets on their heads or hips— and selected the *Bhangi*, a scavenger caste of North India, to represent the problem of untouchability (154).

Trajectories of Disenfranchisement

Need to Control

A variety of authors have offered insights on how power structures are formulated and maintained in a society. Charles Lemert explains that, for Michel Foucault, society is totally dominated by power relations —relations that work to prevent any broad changes from occurring so as to maintain the existing hegemony (Lemert, 1999). Such a system of power makes social change difficult to achieve, unless pursued from within the existing structure of power relations (Foucault, 1977). In other words, no one of their own will surrenders power that is in their hands. The upper castes have for centuries exercised their sovereignty over all other castes precisely because the caste system has provided them with the mechanisms to maintain a particular social order, such as social and economic penalties and boycotts against any violation of its codes. Yet, apart from the consolidation of occupational roles for each caste group, several other strategies have been used to preserve high castes' hegemony.

Sources have been a general problem in Indian social history, as almost all socio-historical documentation —and, thus, interpretation— has laid on upper-caste hands. The symbolic and physical violence of denying water to 'untouchables' is but only one of the crude realities ensuing from such actualisation. The prevention of 'water defilement' is part of a repertoire of discriminatory practices, ranging from social avoidance, to denial of the right to own land or access education, or the infliction of open violence; all of them aiming to keep at bay contamination, avoid the disruption of social norms, and perpetuate Dalits' poverty, helplessness, dependence and ignorance. Moreover, as Dalit communities are usually reduced and assailable minorities, clustered together in segregated hamlets at the edge of settlements, their vulnerable position complicates any resistance. The systematically degraded status of the lower castes has encumbered the Dalit population with years of subjugation, and has nurtured, in turn, a widespread intolerance towards them.

Dalits' relentless struggles for land rights and cultivation are often portrayed in literary representations. One of the many obstacles that impede them from cultivating their own land is the *vetti*, or the prevalent concept of 'free labour' (Ambedkar, 2003). Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* tackles Dalits' position under the feudal system of Hyderabad in pre-

independent India, and displays the strong nexus between caste and land. When Nasiah, the author's grandfather, is rewarded with fifty acres of land by the village Nizam (chief) for the shoes that Nasiah tailored for him, the compensation is considered not only excessive, but outrageous by other upper castes. In fact, given Nasiah's low status, the local landlord (the Dora), feels entitled to take the law into his own hands, and confiscate forty-eight acres:

> 'You son of a bitch, untouchable pig! How dare you present a gift to sarkar and receive land from him?' shouted the Dora... 'You bastard, you are an untouchable! What will you do with fifty acres of land? Do you want to become a landlord and start sitting beside me?' roared the Dora. 'No, no, Dora, how can I commit such a sin? An untouchable like me can never become a landlord. God will punish me. I will go blind. You are my lord, Dora!' The Dora calmed down at this, and looking mercifully at him, said, 'Bastard, take two acres from that gifted land and cultivate it for your family.' Turning to his clerk, he ordered, 'Go and take the rest into account as our land.' Narsiah felt relieved. He was elated at being allowed to retain the two acres. (Satyanarayana, 2011: 15)

Years later, however, landlords belonging to Reddy and Velama castes demanded Narsiah to surrender the remaining two acres of land. Due to his refusal to obey, his family had to face the Dora's wrath: the water supply to Narsiah's land was cut and all family members were heckled, harassed and insulted. Satyanarayana highlights: "No one in the village came out in his support since even his clansmen were of the opinion that being an untouchable, he was not supposed to hold land" (15).

Sujatha Gilda in *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India* (2017) also displays this reinforced connection between land, caste and status. She argues that, in the rural setting, a person may have access to education, may be dressed, and may even have a job; yet, "the real prestige lay[s] in owning land. Among untouchables, owning even a small piece of land is rare" (Gilda, 2017: 34).

Dalits' banishment from schools has been another mechanism used to perpetuate their inferiority and, thus, prevent them from improving their conditions. Anand illustrates this through illiterate Bakha's fantasising about going to school:

> The anxiety of going to school! How beautiful it felt! How nice it must be to be able to read and write! One could read the papers after having been to school. One could talk to the sahibs […]. His uncle had told him when he first expressed the wish to be a sahib that he would have to go to school if he wanted to be one. And he had wept and cried to be allowed to go to school. But then his father had told him that schools were meant for the babus, not for the lowly sweepers. […] He was a sweeper's son and he could never be a babu […] and the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man's sons. […] The masters wouldn't teach the outcastes, lest their fingers should touch the leaves of the outcastes' books and they be polluted. (Anand, 2014: 30)

Rohinton Mistry gives a picture of post-colonial turbulent India in *A Fine Balance* (2006), and represents lower-caste people through the characters of Ishvar and Om, uncle and nephew. The difficulty Dalits had to face when trying to access education and the price they had to pay are put forth, which reinforces the idea that illiteracy has been used as a weapon to further supress Dalits. In this case, Ishvar and his brother Narayan are severely punished by the school teacher for daring to enter the classroom and, what is more, touch the reading materials:

> 'You chammar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!' He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry. […] 'Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge?' (Mistry, 2006: 110)

By the same token, Sujatha Gilda narrates Dalits' ordeal at the hands of upper-caste teachers once they pass the school threshold. She particularly highlights her mother's experience at school, in a post-independence and urban context:

> Manjula feared another man: her history lecturer, Mr. Rama Prabhu. A dogmatic brahmin who despised untouchables, he flaunted his Brahminism, wearing an old-fashioned panche […], a tonsure, and a forehead *bottu* (ritual mark). Every day, every single day, he made Manjula stand up and scolded her in front of the class. 'Why are you here? […] If you cannot focus, why do you pursue education? Education is not suitable for the likes of you.' He always picked her to answer his

> questions. If she couldn't do it, he would disparage her intelligence, and if she did answer, he would say, 'So you think you know everything? You know nothing!' (Gilda, 2017: 162)

Dalits' inaccessibility to education was thus unmistakably employed so as to shield their ignorance and overall backwardness. As Kamble ponders, "The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life" (Kamble, 2008: 37). She adds:

> The upper castes knew quite well that they would be able to control the Mahars only if they were kept on a tight leash. They were scared that if the hold was loosened even a little, the suppressed community would spring up in revolt and break their domination. (18)

The hindrance of not being able to own the land they work and the enforced and degrading — often lowly paid or unpaid— inherited occupations have also cultivated Dalits' dependence on the upper castes for subsistence. Hira Singh points out that it is the economic and political power of the upper castes that reproduces such divisions, adding that such relations of economic dependence are precisely the ones that create conditions that impel Dalits to social indignity (Singh, 2002: 97).

Violence, both verbal and physical, has been unleashed to keep insurgency under control; a violence that has been unfalteringly intensified against those who dare to challenge caste dominance. Calling lower castes by their *jati* name is one of the many practices used to bring about embarrassment and humiliation to Dalits.[69] This is well described in *Joothan*, as Omprakash Valmiki explains that the members of his community were not addressed by their actual names, but the disrespectful caste name *Cuhra* was used to refer to them instead (Valmiki, 2003: 12). In the same vein, Bama progressively unveils her eyes as she writes, and she self-questions: "What did it mean when they called us 'Paraiya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings" (Bama, 2014: 16).

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[69] Y. B. Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* explains that "A caste Hindu whose name is Malliah remains Malliah, but if he belongs to the untouchable community, he is called Malligadu; the suffix 'iah' is respectable whereas 'gadu' is contemptible. So too among women: the caste Hindu Pochamma becomes Pochi among the untouchables, the venerated 'amma' as distinct from the disreputable 'i'" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 18).

The use of obscene and crude vocabulary in *Untouchable* when describing interactions between high and low castes can be interpreted as Anand's refusal to decorate and camouflage Dalit daily life. For instance, as the Dalit body is the centre of various kinds of unpleasant discriminations, most of the insults impinge primarily upon their bodies: "'Get away, you noisy curs!' shouted the Pundit to the crowd of outcastes waiting at the well. 'Get out of the way!'[...] He was attempting to cover his weakness by bullying" (Anand, 2014: 22). When Bakha accidentally touched an upper-caste passer-by in the town, the slur against him was also corporeal:

> 'Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!' the man in the street shouted, his temper spluttering on his tongue […]. 'These swines are getting more and more uppish! One of his brethren who cleans the lavatory of my house, announced the other day that he wanted tow rupees a month instead of one rupee. He walked like a Lat Sahib, like a Laften Gornor! Just think, folks, think of the enormity!' (38-9)

The array of punishments brought about by the disobedience of casteist ethics is also laid bare by Roy. When Ammu and Velutha' affair comes to light, Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, becomes the recipient of Mammachi's rage: "Suddenly the blind old woman […] stepped forward and pushed Vellya Paapen with all her strength. […] Mammachi was shouting, 'Drunken dog! Drunken Paravan liar!'" (Roy, 1997: 256). Later on, Mammachi castes her remaining fury over Velutha. She fiercely shouts: "'If I find you in my propriety tomorrow I'll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!'" (283-84), and she completes the scolding with a spat on Velutha's face.

Another circumstance that adds to the overall helplessness of Dalits is, according to Ambedkar, "the impossibility for Untouchables to obtain any protection from the police or justice and from the courts [since] the police are drawn from the ranks of the caste Hindus" (Ambedkar, 2017: 193). Dalit social and political consciousness is particularly threatened in the rural context where the policeman is the one that reigns with impunity, and where the assertion of their rights means a clash between them and the upper castes, in which case "it is always the latter that have the upper hand" (193).

The violence inflicted by the police on Dalits is recurrent, brutal, and uncalled-for. After being told by a policeman of his duty to supervise a corpse until the next morning, Damu objects that he had not eaten since that morning, and asks the policeman for permission to go home and eat, arguing that he would be back in no time. In response to his argument, the policeman acutely cows him:

> 'Do you see my baton?' [the policeman] asked, brandishing it. 'I'll stick it up your ass and you will see it come out of your throat. I'll beat you up so badly that you'll forget the name of your father.' (Jadhav, 2005: 17-18)

Later on, upon Damu's refusal to pick up the corpse for fear of polluting the dead body with his untouchability, the fauzdar yells: "'You motherfucking son of a bitch, do you see this whip? […] Do you want to see it lashing across your mouth and getting at your tongue? You have my orders. Do as you are told'" (21-2). The police's ruthlessness is also exposed in *The God of Small Things.* Upon arriving at Velutha's house to arrest him, the 'touchable' policemen directly thrust all their brutality towards him, seeking to punish him for his alleged transgression of casteist laws:

> [the twins] heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib. […] The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws. (Roy, 1997: 308)

Injustice and persecution are, thus, perpetrated within the limits of the law. In *A Fine Balance*, Dukhi —Ishvar and Narayan's father, who comes from the Chamaar caste— is threatened and harassed by the upper-caste village people for his audacity of having two sons. As someone spread the rumour that Dukhi abducted a Brahmin's son, this entitles the upper castes to take the boys in their custody:

> 'What is happening to the world?' they complained. 'Why two sons in an untouchable's house, and not even one in ours?' What could a Chamaar pass on to his sons that the gods should reward him thus? Something was wrong, the Law of

> Manu had been subverted. Someone in the village had definitely committed an act to offend the deities, surely some special ceremonies were needed to appease the gods and fill these empty vessels with male fruit. But one of the childless wives had a more down-to-earth theory to explain their unborn sons. It could be she said, that these two boys were not really Dukhi's. Perhaps the Chamaar had journeyed afar and kidnapped a Brahmin's newborns —this would explain everything. (Mistry, 2006: 100)

This proves that, just as there is hardly any way out of the predetermined and degrading profession for Dalits, there is little they can do in order to defend themselves against casteist violence; they usually lack legal protection —such as the presumption of innocence— and their words are valueless compared to the high castes' version. For instance, when upper-caste Baby Kochamma recounts the inspector a completely elaborate story about Ammu and Velutha's sexual encounter, she easily induces the inspector into believing that Velutha abused her niece. She refers to Velutha as a remorseless "sex-crazed Paravan", proud of his deeds despite owing "everything to her family" (Roy, 1997: 260). The inspector, in turn, rebukes the woman for her family's benevolence towards the ungrateful and troublesome untouchables: "You people […] first you spoil these people, carry them about on your head like trophies, then when they misbehave you come running to us for help" (261). Moreover, when the inspector requires Comrade Pillai's —a well-off Hindu working at the family's factory— statement on the matter, the latter corroborates Baby Kochamma's version despite knowing it is false (262). This further demonstrates the high castes' unequivocal qualms of siding with Dalits.

The ordinary violence meted out with total impunity against Dalits is usually such that, when Comrade Pillai's wife learns about the high-caste family's awareness of the inter-caste affair of Ammu and Velutha, she is surprised by the 'low price' Velutha had to pay: "'Is that all? He's lucky they haven't had him strung up from the nearest tree'" (288). Likewise, after the 'touchable' policemen finished beating Velutha, the reader is informed that they acted with economy, efficiency and responsibility: "They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him" (309). What is more, some upper castes even take pleasure in abusing Dalits, as Anand proves through Bakha's collective assault in the town:

> ‘I have erred now. I forgot to call. I beg your forgiveness. It won’t happen again.’ Bakha pleaded. But the crowd was without a shadow of pity for his remorse. It stood unmoved, without heeding his apologies, and taking a sort of sadistic delight in watching him cower under the abuses and curses. (Anand, 2014: 39)

Verbal and physical abuses are, more often than not, a defence mechanism and a way of protecting one’s high-caste status: “‘You’ve touched me, I will have to bath now and purify myself anyhow. Well, take this for your damned irresponsibility, you son of a swine!’ And the tonga-wallah heard a sharp, clear slap through the air” (40). Indeed, this ongoing violence towards the outcastes is the result of caste Hindus necessity to control the subaltern through strength and fear. At the same time, it is also a reminder of the impossibility of escaping one’s inherited low status, as often stated in Roy’s novel:

> Man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. […] though [Estha and Rahel] didn’t know it then, [Velutha’s beating] was a clinical demonstration […] of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. […] It was human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose. […] After all, they were […] merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (Roy, 1997: 308-09)

Pre-established occupations and social positions have also led to the designation of particular characteristics to distinguish Dalits from the rest, and shape their identity. As Mary Douglas argues, bodies are inscribed with meaning and are socially marked. In this case, the same social forces that valorise upper castes’ bodies in turn diminish the Dalit body to a life of contempt and marginalisation; or, as she puts it, “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived” (Douglas, 1970: 93). It is clear, then, that bodily control is an expression of social control (99). Yet, the fragility of this system demands constant supervision, which is why Dalits are forced to bear the markers of inferiority on their bodies and any violation or transgression of the ‘norms’ invites retribution. As such, the body becomes another instrument to reinforce casteist power and an inescapable prison for the individuals belonging to the Dalit community. The interrelation between questions of labour, bodily control and stigma is evinced in the multiple practices of untouchability, as their basis is precisely the maintenance of social and economic distance across castes. It is a circularity of birth, caste, labour and stigma in which the labouring body, which also happens to be a stigmatised body, is inescapably fixated into social hierarchy.

The structures of caste oppression impinged on the processes of identity formation and Dalit bodies have been represented in literary texts in a stereotypical manner. They unequivocally support dominant modes of ideology characterised by condemnation, romanticisation and victimhood. Jacques Rancière argues that textual representations are often “embodied allegories of inequality” (2009: 12) and Gayatri Spivak adds, in *Subaltern Studies V* (1987), that a basic technique of representing the subaltern has been as an object observed ‘from above’ (129).

One of the most conspicuous inferiority markers for Dalits and an epitome of inequality has been the clothing. Kamble makes various references to the nakedness of Dalit children and to the scarce covering of Dalit teenagers, in comparison to the fine garments of the upper castes:

> Their bodies would be completely bare without a stitch on them. […] When girls reached puberty, their mothers would pull out some dirty rags from a bundle and put them on their bodies to somehow cover them. That was all, by way of clothing. A rag would be tied around the waist; its ends pulled between the legs and tucked up at the waist. The traditional khun blouse pieces offered to goddess Mari Aai would be assiduously saved for such purpose. They would be brought out from a bundle and with huge stitches would be somehow made to resemble blouses. That was the uniform for grown-up girls. For the boys, a rag of an arm’s length and four-finger width would be considered adequate to cover their nakedness. But they needed one more thing —a waist string called kargota. This would be made up of sari borders rolled into strings. Even this waist string would be infested with lice, so the skin continuously itched and had to be scratched. The two ends of a rag tucked into this waist band from the front and the back… that was enough of clothing for a boy. He was considered dressed. (Kamble, 2008: 8-9)

The repetition of this kind of images reinforces Dalit children’s identification with nakedness and testifies to their poverty. However, children were not the only ones branded by their clothing, or rather by the lack of it; there was also an established dress-code for adults. Dalit women, for example, had to wear saris in a very specific way:

> They would be wearing saris —their sacred cloth stitched out of rags patched up together with the stitches as thick as fingers. Even their rags were made of several patches put together. Their pallav reached to their knees. A veil fell over their forehead. They wore the saris in the traditional way, the front pleats taken through the legs and tucked behind. There were caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remained hidden. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes. (54)

As regards Dalit males, they were not allowed to wear fine clothes in front of higher castes as a symbol of respect and acceptance of their subalternity. In some parts of the country they were even forbidden to dress above their waist. Roy illustrates this by describing Velutha as a generally 'Barebodied' individual (Roy, 1997: 174), which directly sets him against the upper-caste characters who usually dressed in their finest garments. The imposition of nakedness on Dalits is later recalled as Velutha decides to wear a white shirt at a march. His boldness to cover his body in public, no less, impresses the young girl Rahel: "I did see you. You were a communist and had a *shirt* and a flag" (177; emphasis added). In the same vein, the impact that the urban environment might have had in the way Dalits dress is exposed in *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble stresses the difference between the village dwellers and her town-working father reckoning that "If he ever visits our place […] who will be able to say that he's a Mahar? He looks so smart, just like a king!" (Kamble, 2008: 46).

Another resource used to justify Dalit exploitation has been the propagation of the image of Dalits as dirty, simple-minded and subservient, by the upper-caste discourse. Anand testifies to this through the description of Rakha, Bakha's brother:

> [h]is feet dragging a pair of Bakha's old ammunition boots, laceless and noisy and too big for him. His tattered flannel shirt, grimy with the blowings of his ever-running nose, […] his dirty face on which the flies congregated in abundance to taste of the sweet delights of the saliva on the corners of his lips. The quizzical, not-there look defined by his small eyes and his narrow, very narrow forehead, was positively ugly. […] He seemed a true child of the outcaste colony. […] He had

> wallowed in its mire, bathed in its marshes, played among its rubbish-heaps; his listless, lazy, lousy manner was a result of his surroundings. He was the vehicle of a life-force, the culminating point in the destiny of which would never come, because malaria lingered in his bones, and that disease does not kill but merely dissipates the energy. He was a friend of the flies and the mosquitoes, their boon companion since his childhood. […] He ate big morsels. His mouth filled on one side. It looked grotesque. (Anand, 2014: 71-2)

While Rakha symbolises the ordinary 'untouchable', Bakha's cleanliness and manners stand out; Anand describes him as being 'comparatively clean', despite his dirty job. In fact, Bakha seems even "A bit superior to his job" to one of the upper-caste characters in the novel, and definitely "not the kind of man who ought to be doing this" (9). His intelligence, sensitivity and, most surprisingly, dignity do not "belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean" (9). Anand reflects that "It was perhaps his absorption in his task that gave him the look of distinction, or his exotic dress however loose and ill-fitting, that removed him above his odorous world" (9).

Dalits' dirtiness, Kamble explains, is a result of the meagre conditions to which they have been subjected on a daily basis. She emphasises that "People would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin" (Kamble, 2008: 8). The graphic and striking descriptions of her community's wretchedness abound in her text:

> They looked like rag dolls, nibbled and torn by sharp-teethed mice. The thick tangles of hair would be infested with lice and coated with lice eggs. Children looked as if they had rolled in mud, snot dripping from their noses in green gooey lines. If one were to use a figure of speech, their noses were like leaky taps of snot. (8)

Intellectual capacities have also worked as another glaring identity gap between upper castes and Dalits. The latter have been systematically infantilised and their intelligence reduced, taking a cue from the mind-body isomorphism. In fact, the recurrent imagery of Dalits as meek and stupid has served a particular purpose: to deny them intellectual work and relegate them to manual and body work instead. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha and his family are subjected to a 'perpetual infantilism' (Rubbo & Taussig, 1983: 19); apart from having to obey

the upper castes in the same way a child would obey a parent, the only amicable bond Velutha is able to develop with the higher castes is with the twins, Estha and Rahel. This inevitably endows the subaltern, in this case Velutha and his family, with childish ignorance. By the same token, Dalits' imposed association with hard manual labour required a justification, and the representation of their bodies as dim-witted, yet resilient, re-enforced their subservient nature. In this manner, no reference is made to Velutha or his family's intelligence; instead, they are often characterised as docile, tamed and trained for endurance and productive capability.

As for Dalit males,[70] the colonial and upper-caste male gaze froze their bodies into contradictory but rigid forms, embedded in existing hierarchical power relations and varying according to the context. On the one hand, Dalit males were often portrayed as meek, feeble and emasculated characters who, at the same time, were fitted for hard physical labour. This conditioning of Dalit masculinity has also led to the perception that inter-caste relations would entail lesser patriarchal oppression than conventional endogamous marriages. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu's decision to romantically engage with Velutha is an expression of her resistance against the patriarchal oppression in her caste. However, her determination is inversely proportional to the downsizing of Velutha's manliness and social castration, enforced by representations such as Velutha wearing nail polish.

The gruelling tasks that Dalits must perform paradoxically shape their bodies into symbols of attraction and conduit of sexual discovery for the high castes. This is the case of both Velutha and Bakha, whose muscular bodies epitomise strength and masculinity, in contrast with upper-caste male ones such as Chacko, Ammu's brother, who is represented as heavy and showing difficulty to move: "As [Ammu] watched [Velutha] she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. […] Had given him his strength, his supple grace" (Roy, 1997: 334). The eroticisation of Velutha's body and the growing attraction Ammu feels towards him are brought to the fore several times in the novel; one such example is upon Sophie Mol's arrival at the Ayemenem house:

[70] The issue of masculinity in Indian literature is, without doubt, not straightforward. Significant works have revealed that, in colonial discourse, the male body was constructed on an opposition between the 'manly British' and 'the effeminate colonial subject'. An examination of Dalit masculinity complicates, however, these rigid links constructed between masculinity, domination and power (Nandy, 1983).

> [Ammu] saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed […] from a flatmuscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. (175)

In the short story "Dassehra Sacrifice", Bagul also testifies to this bodily branding and details the admiration that an entire village felt towards the Dalit male working body:

> The crowd looked at Deva with great affection. This gave his lean and muscular body a most attractive line and the whole crowd began to admire the proportions of his thighs and calves, his biceps and triceps, his chest and neck. […] Black as a crow and strong as a stone. (Bagul, 2018: 54)

According to Maryam Mirza, "the beauty of the subaltern character works to demystify the stereotypical notion that physical beauty […] is a 'natural' characteristic of the wealthy" (Mirza, 2016: 19). However, their beauty increases their vulnerability rather than diminish it, especially in the case of subaltern women, as it exposes them even more to exploitation and violence. By the same token, instead of signalling the possibility of transcending class and caste lines, and point to a potential social ascension of the poor and beautiful, Dalits' physical attractiveness accentuates their predicament. Sohini's —Bakha's sister— beauty is considered as a curse (Anand, 2014: 54) since, apart from heightening her exposure to abuse, the fact that a Hindu priest has shown interest in her certainly does not have a positive impact on her social standing. Hence, the eroticisation of the servant's body leads to an additional objectification of the subaltern and to an accentuation of their overall oppression and subjugation.

On the other hand, there has been an equally strong projection of Dalits, especially males, as sexually-potent, violent, and threatening criminals. At one point, Bagul portrays Dalit males as half-uncivilised wild beasts, naïve and immature beings (Bagul, 2018: 62), unable to do anything other than wrestling, gambling or performing menial jobs. These two images have fed into each other and have been framed and confined to narrow representational fields, being invoked depending on the ideological contextual need. The cultural meanings of the Dalit body symbolise the aesthetic, cultural and social values of the casteist semiotics of the time. The imagery and language used have definitely reinforced the stereotypes created around them,

both in bodily and moral terms, transcending from abstract textual categories to foundational ones.

‘Othering’ Dalits

Some parallels have been drawn between Dalit subordination, colonial and class subalterns, and racial victims. These comparisons, although informative up to a point, have also proven to be insufficient and problematic. The term ‘subaltern’ has been used and defined primarily by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci, the subaltern is any person or group whose race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion render him or her of inferior rank and station (1971: 55). In the preface to the fourth volume of *Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha stated:

> [the] word ‘subaltern’ in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, ‘of inferior rank’. It will be used […] as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way […]. There will be much […] which should relate to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity as well as to the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems —in short, the culture informing that condition. (Guha, 1994: vii)

Taking a cue from Guha’s application of the term to the Indian colonial context, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak denounces the authoritarian nature of mainstream Western knowledge production. She uses as a basis for her critical analysis the philosophical traditions of Kant, Hegel and Marx, along with the psychoanalytical categories that Freud and Lacan proposed; she breaks monolithic femininity and masculinity by deconstructing them in the Derridian fashion, and hints at caution against wholesome assimilation of Western values to essentialise the universal (Spivak, 1988). Additionally, she offers a constructive critique of what she calls ‘sanctioned ignorance’, produced by the colonial machinery. Yet, while stimulating, the epistemology she follows in her critique of external colonisation does not investigate the inherent nature of ‘ignorance’ in the Indian context, nor the internal ‘colonisation’ —both embedded in dominant colonial cultural practices and produced by a native local hegemony. The intricate connection between societal practices and their governing ideas —such as the

sacredness of religious textual traditions and belief systems— in the knowledge-formation processes, and their conceptual frameworks and objectives —such as casteist-protected ignorance— is neglected in Gayatri's approach; at the same time, the agency of the Indian subaltern is also misperceived and undermined. The neglect of internal subordination in her analysis could be due to many factors. One of the reasons could be the generalised interpretation of assertions of marginalised and excluded communities as a threat to the unity of the 'Indian subaltern'. This supposed division would also add to the colonial discourse that questioned India's ability as a nation to overcome myriad fissures and challenges.

Consequently, the categories of 'élite' and 'subaltern' have been unaccentuated by social experiences. As a result, the term 'subaltern' in the Indian context has remained largely inaccessible to the people it was supposed to represent. Moreover, these two categories have also been re-constructed from a modernist perspective, thus overlooking pre-modern inherited privileges such as pre-colonial dynamics of caste domination and oppression, and thereby rendering the categorisation, not only incomplete, but also skewed. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak mounts the critique of postcolonialism by ironically failing to allow Indian subalterns to speak for themselves. She, therefore, reinscribes and co-opts neo-colonial imperatives of cultural domination and erasure. This renders the 'subaltern' category largely theoretical and even moulded, since authentic subaltern representation was conspicuous by its absence. 'Subaltern' as understood and applied in India becomes problematic then, particularly when it is read against Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a division of labourers rather than a simple division of labour. The experience of division of labourers cannot be fully understood through the nomenclature 'subaltern' as proposed by Gramsci in terms of a generic class-oriented rubric, as this fails to enclose all casteist nuances, such as graded hierarchy.

Apart from the failure to grasp all caste differences and their implications, the application of 'subaltern' to Dalits could also be problematic because of the perpetual stigma attached to it. The logic of hegemonic powers is to keep the subalterns as subaltern; if the Dalits were to incarnate the epitome of subalternity, their stigma of defilement and impurity as a ritual-symbolic expenditure would position them in a place of "structural negativity that would give caste its coherence by uniting all castes in their repulsion of the untouchable" (Rao, 2009: 18). According to Marcus Green, it would be a 'manufactured subalternity' that would transform stigma into a permanent mark of identification and would give 'social élite' a justification for

their superiority (Green, 2011). Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) testifies to the dangers of this indissoluble stigma, and claims that "The chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away" (Valmiki, 2003: 85).

Another association constructed in the Indian context is the caste and class axis, as both concepts have often been interpreted as coterminous. As stated before, many of the debates on caste explain and analyse the caste system in terms of the structural relations it sustains through the language of exploitation and oppression. This is what Dumont has labelled as 'ritual hierarchy' (Dumont, 1970) and what informs the debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi on the nature of caste in India (Dirks, 2001). However, the understanding of caste in terms of ritual hierarchy has assumed an intersection of 'caste' and 'class' which requires the examination of both the convergence as well as the divergence between the two, as concepts and as groups (Mukherjee, 1999; Chakravarti, 2002). Conceptually, the link between the two refers to the economic content of caste, such as the division of labour or the ritual calling and rendering of services, that together with other economic criteria of access to resources and opportunities — such as land, education, and consequent poverty— compose this nexus (Srinivas, 1962, 2009). Moreover, colonial and post-colonial social changes in the early 20th century and the rise of Communist movements across India have influenced the perception of caste as a system of exploitation of one class by another, of the landless by the landed, or of the lower by the upper castes. In his seminal analysis of the caste system, Ambedkar also acknowledged the similarity between caste and class as tools of domination and oppression (Ambedkar, 1994: 225-26).

While the implications of both categories appear to have a similar outcome, and class is in a way embedded in caste, their confluence carries at least one major shortcoming. 'Caste' is a term associated with tradition and religion, whereas 'class' has positioned itself firmly within the secular modern discourse of state, citizenship and human rights.[71] In keeping with this essential difference between the two, the understanding of, and approach to either term will tend to differ.[72] The Marxist thought which spread across India in the second half of the 20th

[71] Despite its claims to secularism, the modern discourse of the Indian state was dominated by the Indian nationalist cause, which has claimed its legitimacy from the popular to the divine —which is in itself an upper-class/upper-caste response to the various struggles of 20th-century India.

[72] Kalyani Thakur, for instance, has presented an adamant position on the 'secularisation' of her poetry: "The belief in class exploitation encourages us to interpret all injustice through the same lens. But that is not the whole

century has failed to critically engage and endorse caste assertions or to tackle Dalit oppression altogether (Guru, 2011; Teltumbde, 2017). Kancha Ilaiah, a Dalits' rights activist and a Dalit himself, goes further and accuses Marxist universalism in the Indian context as, not only caste blind, but also Brahminic in essence (Ilaiah, 2002).

Dolores Herrero comments on Kavita Bhanot's (Bhanot qtd. in Herrero, 2019) critique on Meena Kandasamy's shallow management of the complex relationship between caste and class in the ongoing conflict between Dalits and landowners depicted in *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014). Although the caste and class intermingling is tackled in the novel, Herrero contends that Kandasamy fails to adequately grasp and analyse the consequences and implications of the 'congruence' between the two (Herrero, 2019). As Anupama Rao explains, caste and class imply different things and, therefore, should never be put on an equal stand. To transform caste into class, he stresses, would simply ignore "caste's history as (Hindu) violence" (Rao, 2013: 55).

The God of Small Things displays the measures taken by the upper-caste/upper-class élites in order to consciously align class and caste categories and, thereby, severely limit social mobility. Velutha's subalternity, for instance, is reinforced by the intermeshing of these two categories. The profession he holds, as well as his corresponding salary, would seem to accord him a higher position than the one compatible with his Dalit status. However, Mammachi perceives —or insists on perceiving— Velutha as a 'coolie', a term laden with deeply pejorative connotations, and employed to refer to an unqualified, unskilled labourer. Thus, his further training and skilfulness does not free Velutha from the 'coolie' label and certainly deprives him from any social upgrade. In an attempt to restore the 'natural' order of things, which Velutha's talent and expertise may have disrupted, Mammachi pays him less than what his job should demand. Far from considering her behaviour as unjust or exploitative, she sees it as completely rational:

> To keep the others happy and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, she paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan […]. She thought he ought to be grateful that he was

truth. Class is only one element of our caste. I will not let them take away the caste-identity of my poems" (Thakur qtd. in Mukherjee, 2018: 147).

> allowed on the factory premises at all and allowed to touch the things that Touchables touched. She said it was a big step for a Paravan. (Roy, 1997: 77)

Another marker of Dalits' othering has been colour. Edward Saïd contends that the colour of one's skin has historically granted superior ontological status and greater power over others:

> Being a White Man was therefore an *idea and a reality*. It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and the non-white worlds. It meant —in the colonies— speaking in a certain way, behaving according to a code of regulations, and even feeling certain things and not others. It meant specific judgments, evaluations, gestures. It was a form of authority […], an agency for the expression, diffusion, and implementation of policy […], a concrete manner of being-in-the-world, a way of taking hold of reality, language, and thought. (Saïd, 2003: 227; emphasis added)

This idea and reality created a rigidly binomial opposition of 'ours' versus 'theirs', an opposition that, Saïd posits, is reinforced not only by anthropology or linguistics but also by history by asserting the inescapability from it (233). This brings about a distorted knowledge of the 'other', and generates reductive images that lead to the "demonization of an unknown enemy" (xx).

In the Indian context, the **'**dark' colour of Dalits is often contrasted with the fair skin of the high castes, which reflects the colour-coded prejudice historically inculcated on the Indian consciousness. As Amali Philips explains,

> The concept of skin colour in India, and more generally in South Asia, embraces much more than chromatic qualities, for the semantics of colour include cultural perceptions and judgments about associated moral and behavioural qualities, health and appearance, and individual and collective identities. (Philips, 2004: 253)

Priya Menon remarks that whiteness has been spectacularised, encoded and articulated at every turn, rendering Indian standards of beauty largely governed by it (Menon, 2010: 135). Conversely, certain cultural association exists between dark skin or 'blackness' and a lower-caste status, as evoked by the physical ravages of toiling "long in the hot sun" (Philips, 2004:

355). This, as G. S. Ghurye suggests, could have informed or been informed by the *varna*-colour equation (Ghurye, 1961: 45).

Anand reveals the importance of skin colour and the connotations of black skin in the pre-independence Indian mindset: “Bakha came down the tree like a black bear, and arrested the democrat’s attention by the ridiculous sight he presented. […] ‘Eh, eh, black man, come here. Go and get a bottle of soda-water for the sahib” (Anand, 2014: 132-33). This implication has permeated all castes’ psyches. The same is true of a cook, considered a lower caste as well, who ponders as follows while glancing at Bakha:

> [h]e might be one of the sapper (soldier). As the sappers, in spite of their dark colour and dirty clothes, are of the grass-cutter caste, no one would object to sending one of them on an errand to fetch fire. (92-3)

In this context, the repetitive references to Velutha’s black body in Roy’s text are particularly worthy of analysis. *The God of Small Things* often displays the difference in skin colour between upper and lower castes (Roy, 1997: 6, 73). However, the environment in which this difference is accentuated most is the sexual encounters between Ammu and Velutha, precisely due to the transgression of pre-established boundaries that this meant: “[they] stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness” (334-35). This cultural baggage associated with Dalits conditions the perception of Velutha’s body —and indeed of his entire Dalit being— and produces a feeling of deep-seated disgust among Ammu’s family towards him. Baby Kochamma, for instance, is filled with physical revulsion when she learns of Velutha and Ammu’s liaison: “‘*How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?*’ And she shuddered theatrically, like a child being forced-fed spinach” (78; emphasis in the original). This type of olfactory observations is repeated when Vellya Paapen informs Mammachi of Ammu and Velutha’s sexual relationship (257), and is surprisingly ‘sensed’ by Ammu herself: “She smelled the river on him. His Particular Paravan smell that so disgusted Baby Kochamma” (335). Mammachi’s reaction is, predictably, even stronger: “She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy *coolie*… His particular Paravan Smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited” (257-58; emphasis in the original).

Roy emphasises again the relevance of colour in the post-independence Indian context in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and informs the reader that the stigma surrounding one's skin has not been erased by democracy nor modernity:

> One of the things that S. Murugesan had secretly enjoyed about being in Kashmir was that fair-skinned Kashmiris would often taunt Indian soldiers by mocking their dark skins and calling them 'Chamar nasl' (Chamar breed). He was amused by the rage it provoked among those of his fellow soldiers who considered themselves upper caste and thought nothing of calling *him* a Chamar, which was what North Indians usually called all Dalits, regardless of which of the many Untouchable castes they belonged to. (317; emphasis in the original)

Physical beauty, then, is closely tied in with social hierarchies and, in this particular cultural context, is very much colour-coded. Ammu's lover's skin is "so black" that his parents named him 'Velutha', meaning 'white' in Malayalam (Roy, 1997: 73). Generally speaking, the physical beauty or ugliness attributed to a character in a work of literature is hardly ever "neutral but is predicated on ideological considerations" (Davis, 1987: 124). Indeed, Roy appears to make a conscious effort to insist on the beauty of Velutha's blackness, remarking for instance his "dark legs" and "smooth ebony chest" (Roy, 1997: 334-35). She might employ this strategy in an attempt to debunk the Indian mainstream standards of beauty emphasised by Menon (2010: 135), and to reclaim culturally acceptable ones. As Kancha Ilaiah contends, "beauty and ugliness are both culturally constructed notions that gradually transform our consciousness", and thus "it is important that these notions be recast to change the hegemonic relations that have been brought into force in the process" (Ilaiah qtd. in Amin & Chakrabarty, 1997: 169). This idea echoes the concurrent social sentiment encapsulated by the slogan 'Black Is Beautiful' through which the African American community sought to modify established notions of beauty. As bell hooks points out, this slogan "worked to intervene in and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable" (hooks, 1996: 120).

In response to the outlining of the hard-working and dark subaltern's beauty, Dirk Wiemann objects that the Dalit's "desirable athleticism" is marked by a facile, normative idealisation, which depends on "readily available, over-determined images of bodily perfection" (Wiemann, 2008: 291). In Roy's text, Velutha's body is constructed following standard precepts of beauty;

even so, Ammu's awareness of his beauty, her response to it and, most importantly, her refusal to subscribe to dominant ideologies testify to her liminality —rather than her regularity— as regards the established social order.

In his analysis of caste and class confluence, Govind Ghurye advises that "too great an importance must not be attached to the fact that *varna* used to mean colour, for people could change their *varna* in the early ages, but certainly not their race" (Ghurye, 1961: 45; emphasis in the original). He hints at an ethnic origin that preceded the use of the term to denote merely class in the late Vedic period.[73] Tickell has observed that the identification of dark skin with the lowest castes may have been the result of the work of some European scholars who 'racialised caste'. In their widespread assumption, caste divisions were developed after advanced Aryan races invaded northern India in the pre-Vedic period and subjugated darker-skinned native Dravidian people, thus excluding them from 'twice-born' caste status (Tickell, 2007: 25).[74] Therefore, another point of intersection as regards Dalits' subalternity has been the racial connotation of the caste system, which derived in the master-slave binary dialectic so often evidenced in the texts dealing with Dalits.

The word 'caste' was loosely applied to the Hindu system of social stratification by the 16th-century Portuguese. Since *casta* in Portuguese means 'pure' or 'chaste', the word connoted the understanding of the phenomenon as being akin to race, species or lineage, as they thought the system was intended to preserve purity of blood. This idea of the conservation of racial purity was transformed into restrictions of inter-marriage and inter-dining practices across India. 'Racial' explanations for the origins of the caste system developed by political figures such as Jyotiba Phule also contributed to consolidating this connection (O'Hanlon, 1985).

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[73] In *Ancient India* (1997), Kosambi convincingly argues that the perception of castes (*varna*) several centuries ago was not radical in the current sense of the term, a fact indicated by the possibility for dominant non-Aryan groups or individuals to move up the Aryan structure. Through a process of 'Aryanisation' they could climb the social ladder and occupy high positions, such as those of priests.

[74] The discourses of race and caste emerged simultaneously, as both terms enabled the Europeans to justify the expropriation of values from certain parts of the world. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, European conservatives justified their gains on the basis of race and caste —now rendered in terms of biology— and continued relying upon their imputed racial superiority. European powers blamed the oppressed for their own oppression and exculpated themselves from manufacturing biological ideas of inferiority, thus demonstrating the strengthening of caste along imperial lines (Tickell, 2007).

However, the synonymousness of the two terms has been called into question by many scholars who reject the Aryan invasion theory and deny any innate typological difference between the upper castes (Aryan tribes) and the lower castes (conquered tribes). Ambedkar, for instance, argued instead that the *Dasas* and *Dasyus* were not a dark, non-Aryan race or an aboriginal tribe subjugated by fairer-skinned conquerors; he attributed the group's current position to historical inter-tribal conflicts (Ambedkar, 1990: 76-8, 85, 106, 242).[75] Moreover, the readily correlation between casteist and racial victims is also troublesome. Dalits' condition has often been compared to the predicament of Black Americans, as both communities have been suffused with an oppressed and marginalised existence. This points at definite correspondences and affinities between the caste system and slavery which, although involuntarily arisen, have also been voluntarily crafted.[76] The Dalit Panther movement is a case in point as it took its cue from the Black Panthers movement in the United States. This comparability has, however, been historically problematic because, apart from obvious differences, there are other inward discrepancies. The most obvious one, as Andre Beteille points out in his influential essay "Race, Caste and Gender", is the fact that the connotations of 'race' are more physiognomic —as blacks and whites have different heredities— while 'caste' has a socio-economic basis rather than any decisive racial difference between Dalits and *savarnas* (Beteille, 1990: 490). On that note, Sujatha Gilda, in *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India*, narrates the following after emigrating to Canada:

> When people in this country ask me what it means to be an untouchable, I explain that caste is like racism against blacks here. But then they ask, 'How does anyone

[75] He further contradicted the racial reasoning stating that "If caste means race, then differences of sub-castes cannot mean differences of race, because sub-castes become *ex hypothesi* sub-divisions of one and the same race. Consequently, the bar against intermarrying and inter-dining between sub-castes cannot be for the purpose of maintaining purity of race or of blood. If sub-castes cannot be eugenic in origin, there cannot be any substance in the contention that caste is eugenic in origin" (Ambedkar, 2014a: 239; emphasis in the original). Moreover, while using the theory of caste purity as a basis for the understanding of the development of inter-marriage banning, he argued for the uselessness of inter-dining prohibition as blood is not infected by sharing food, and thus there is no racial deterioration. He concluded that "The caste system does not demarcate racial division. The caste system is a social division of people of the same race" (238). He explained the purpose of this division as follows: "The Brahmin believes in the two-nation theory. He claims to be the representative of the Aryan race and he regards the rest of the Hindus as descendants of the non-Aryans. The theory helps him to establish his kinship with the European races and share their arrogance and their superiority. He likes particularly that part of the theory which makes the Aryan an invader and a conqueror of the non-Aryan native races. For it helps him to maintain and justify his overlordship over the non-Brahmins" (Ambedkar, 1990: 80).

[76] Thinkers such as Gunnar Myrdal (1967) and Gerald Berreman (1967) have foregrounded the inevitability of this comparison.

> know what your caste is?' They know caste isn't visible, like skin color. (Gilda, 2017: 3-5)

Sharankumar Limbale also stands by this divergence as he claims that, while the black community in the United States had been suffering from slavery since 1619, the Dalit community has been subjugated since ancient times (Limbale, 2004: 82). He adds that, while some slaves could recur to buying their freedom, Dalits' birth label rendered that possibility unfeasible, which points at its permanent stain (85). Another point of dissent between the two underscored by Limbale is the fact that the black slave is bound to a single master —meaning that control and domination stem from a single source— while Dalits are 'societal slaves', which underlines their ubiquitous subordination (85).[77]

Anand Teltumbde goes on to state that slavery and untouchability produce opposite consciousness. He claims that, "While caste consciousness strengthens the caste system, slave consciousness resists the system of slavery" (Teltumbde, 2017: 42). Quoting Ambedkar, he argues: "Tell a slave, he is a slave and he will rise in revolt" (42). Such a reaction was unlikely in the case of Dalits, as they have been enduring their subordination for centuries and to such an extent that the feeling of untouchability has induced a sense of self-deprecation in them that inevitably kills their spirit of revolt. Teltumbde elucidates that this difference in consciousness is due to the differential structures of the two systems:

> In slavery, the system had two dominant parts in contradiction: slaves and masters. The structure of the caste system depicts a continuum that obviates the neat division between the oppressor and the oppressed. The contradiction is pushed down to the local levels, not for elimination of the oppression but for becoming an oppressor. The castes contend within their locale with the castes which suffer similar oppression as them, for superiority. This eliminates the possibility of any rebellion against the system as a whole. (42)

[77] Ambedkar took the distinction further and noted that 'untouchability' and 'slavery' were in fact treated as two separate phenomena and offences in India. Slavery was abolished by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843, when the East India Company issued a proclamation against dealing with slaves in British India, while the history of the eradication of untouchability started in 1938 with the Madras Temple Entry Act. The Constitution of India abolished untouchability under Article 17 and declared it as an offence punishable by law. In accordance with the constitutional provisions, the Indian Parliament passed The Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1955 to deal with the offence (Anantha, 1937).

E. M. Forster showcases this dissimilarity in the Afterword to *Untouchable*:

> The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. (Forster, 2014: 142)

In analysing Bakha's figure, one can resolve that the life of a lower-caste Hindu is more painful than the life of a slave. There is no escape from the curse of untouchability for him, precisely because the ideological assimilation of untouchability by the whole Hindu society gives it a sense of institutionalisation. Therefore, as Teltumbde argues, the connection between caste and race, if and when done, should entail caution as conflating race and caste might collapse different contexts of social injustice and might harm particular struggles (Teltumbde, 2005).

Nonetheless, although the term 'caste' as constructed in colonial times and enforced in the contemporary context has proven distinct to 'race', they have undeniably been connected through several aspects. They have both been used as methods to exert control and justify supremacy, and many similarities are found in the feelings of ownership, entitlement and superiority, as demonstrated by White and *savarna* societies. Both African American and Dalit communities have been targets of systematic inequalities that reveal striking correspondences of suffering and anguish, and whose ultimate manifestation is the master-slave dialectic discernible in similar patterns of discrimination, abuse, exploitation and negation of identity.[78]

The perpetually unequal relation between fully-fledged high castes and unrightful and marginal low castes points to Hegel's (1979) paradigm of master-slave, which was later developed by Frantz Fanon (1986) in his dichotomous postulation of 'us' and 'others'. According to Hegel, masters will always deny social and economic equality to slaves since that might empower

[78] Apart from the colour-coded and ethnic discrimination, both African American and Dalit communities have been imposed a well-defined physical and social segregation, proving that the fundamental nature of their stigma and humiliation, and the moral-ethical question that arises from it, is universal in nature (Guru, 2011). While examining the same forms of exploitation operative in both caste and race, Andre Beteille focused on the most striking similarity between the two: their reliance on forms of contrast predicated on the axis of the purity-pollution (Beteille, 1990).

them and guide them towards self-determination. Additionally, people usually perceive themselves through the image that others project of them. In the case of Dalits, this perception has led them to constant low self-esteem and a generalised sense of helplessness. In *The God of Small Things*, for instance, both high and low-caste characters adhere to their pre-established roles of 'the superior' and 'the subaltern' without questioning their validity and application. In the same vein, *Untouchable* portrays low-spirited Dalits who seem to have internalised their objectification and accepted their peripheral position. At the temple, Bakha was aware that he had to maximise his humbleness as he was facing a much more orthodox crowd:

> [he] stared beyond the throng with his inner eye, not daring to look beyond the gate with the overt, lifted eye of the ordinary man curious to know, to solve a mystery, but *like a slave stealing an enquiry into the affairs of his master*. (Anand, 2014: 47; emphasis added)

Kamble also poignantly emphasises Dalits' assimilation of this connection: "'The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master.' This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times, even to a small child if it belonged to a higher caste" (Kamble, 2008: 52). Whenever a young girl, out of ignorance, failed to join this chant, the rest of the Mahars would try to appease the insulted high castes: "No, no kind master! That girl is a new animal in the herd! […] please forgive us for this crime" (53). Kamble's community was "bound by the chains of slavery. It was on the Mahars' labour that these idle parasites lived. The condition of the Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, those beasts of burden" (80).

Drawing on antiracist movements in the United States and elsewhere, the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement has even sought to explicitly link the category of caste to race in an attempt to globalise the dissent against casteist discrimination, which resonates with the anti-racist critique of scholars such as Frantz Fanon (Manoharan, 2017; Guru, 2011). Inversely, the concept of caste has also been used for the purpose of explaining racial segregation politics in the United States of the 1930s and 1940s. As Ursula Sharma argues, 'segregation' was explained in terms of 'social' processes as against genetics or 'ethnic groups', as the latter accounts were considered insufficient to convey the "enforced social distance between blacks

and whites and the apparent permanence of this division" (Sharma, 2002: 17).[79] In this way, as Vijay Prashad has contended, the comparison of race and caste has functioned as a way to create solidarity among the disenfranchised in different parts of the world (Prashad, 2001).

This association has been accentuated in the second half of the 20th century. Apart from the provisions in favour of non-discrimination in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted in 1965, defined racial discrimination as

> [a]ny distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference, based on race, colour, descent, national or ethnic which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. (Human Rights Watch, 2007: web page)

The relationship between race and caste has been debated with renewed vigour in the light of the United Nations Conference Against Racism and Other Related Discrimination, held in 2001 in Durban, during which caste was declared to be a form of racism.[80] The debates emerging from this conference, situated as they were in the realpolitik, mapped a global structure of oppression, and directed international attention towards the Dalits' condition in India (Beteille, 2001; Omvedt, 2001a, 2001b).

The shift from race alone to descent and occupation-based discrimination, and the recognition of membership in endogamous social groups as the originator of social and occupational isolation —instead of one's physical appearance or race— meant not just re-mapping the field of caste in the new racial context, but also including other groups in similar social locations in

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[79] While there were further interjections in this debate by academics such as Oliver Cromwell Cox —who contended that the concept of caste could not be used outside of the Indian caste hierarchy— theorists such as Gerald Berreman made the opposite claim, and stated that there were comparisons to be made between the two social systems, especially in terms of recognising them as exercises in power (Sharma, 2002: 17-20).

[80] Till the mid 1990s, the debate was located within a national context and caste itself was constructed in terms of its 'peculiarity' to Indian society. The Durban Conference against racism witnessed the 'freeing' of caste from the confines of India into a larger international arena that held out greater possibilities for public debate, alliance building and more powerful resistance. Dalits' participation in the Conference generated an entire discourse in India on questions of 'proper' political resistance and the theoretical and sociological validity of viewing caste through the prism of racism, among other issues.

the context of caste. This transference enables what Thomas Laqueur has termed a "moral imagination" able to expand one's capacity so as to feel the "exigency of wrongs suffered by strangers at a distance" (Laqueur, 2001: 134).

However, the wrongs suffered by Indian subalterns have not been homogenous. The caste system has proven to be a system of social organisation that instilled in every social group the need of safeguarding one's hierarchy and status quo, and indicated difficult clear-cut demarcations between high and low castes. This is what Ambedkar categorised as 'graded inequality'; he stressed that castes are not monolithic but graded all along into disparate collections of realities and conditions. He proposed that, in the context of the Indian caste system, in which the notions of 'equality' and 'inequality' have regularly been employed, inequality is not half as dangerous as 'graded inequality'. Moreover, in a state of inequality — as in the case of class divisions— the working class can challenge the domination of the bourgeoisie by organising themselves as a group. In the caste system, however, the intra-divisions among the oppressed disable any formation of a singular group against the oppressors. Ambedkar extensively elaborated on this structural peculiarity of the caste system, and pitted 'graded inequality' against 'social inequality' as follows:

> [i]t may not be an exaggeration to say that not many people understand the significance of this principle [of graded inequality]. The social system based on inequality stands on a different footing from a social system based on graded inequality. The former is a weak system which is not capable of self-preservation. The latter, on the other hand, is capable of self-preservation. In a social system based on inequality, the low orders can combine to overthrow the system. None of them have any interest to preserve it. In a social system based on graded inequality, the possibility of a general common attack by the aggrieved parties is non-existent. In a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level. This can happen only when they are only high and low. All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest, but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. The high wants to overthrow the higher who is above him, but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and

> the high, but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. In the system of graded inequality, there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the social system. (Ambedkar, 1989: 101-02)

Ambedkar's pondering indicates that the philosophy behind the caste system is to accept as normal a community in the higher rung, just as it is normal to have a community in the lower rung. Conversely, a mind that is willing to exercise power over a marginalised community would also be willing to submit to the power of a dominant community. A slave will essentially learn how to treat a slave from his or her master. When s/he finally gets power, s/he will follow the same pattern of domination on those beneath him or her. Consequently, while closing themselves in, castes close other groups out, who in turn are forced to form themselves into castes (Ambedkar, 1995: 19-20).

Roy's novel illustrates this multi-layered inequality among the low castes mainly through the character of Kochu Maria, the high-caste family's cook. She is "Not a Pelaya, or a Pulaya, or a Paravan. But a Touchable […] Christian" (Roy, 1997: 170), a status that enables her to live inside the high castes' house, to touch their food, and even to occasionally eat with them (88). That does not protect her, however, from being considered a subaltern altogether, and thus being abused: "*Kochu Maria, you ugly black dwarf*" (171; emphasis in the original).

The magnitude of intra-caste divisions among Dalits is laid bare in *Untouchable* on several occasions. Gulabo, a washerwoman, is well-aware of the graded inequality in the village and refuses to relinquish her —slightly— superior social standing at any one time. As she coincides with Sohini —Bakha's sister and thus a sweeper— at the village well, she deems it the perfect occasion to point out her priority to the girl and the rest of the onlookers:

> [Gulabo] was notorious as an assertive old hussy who thought herself superior to every other outcaste, first because she claimed a high place in the hierarchy of the castes among the low castes […]. Now Sohini being of the lowest caste among the outcastes would naturally be looked down upon by Gulabo […]. 'Have you heard

> of such immodesty? This sweeper girl goes about without an apron over her head all day in town and in the cantonment. […] You ought to be ashamed of yourself! […] You bitch! You prostitute! Wanton! And your mother dead. […] Aren't you ashamed of showing your teeth to me in presence of men, you prostitute?' the washerwoman exploded. […] 'But I haven't done anything to annoy her, she herself began it all and is abusing me right and left. I didn't pick the quarrel' Sohini reflected. […] 'You annoy me with your silence, you illegally begotten! You eater of dung and drinker of urine! You bitch of a sweeper woman!' Gulabo shouted. (Anand, 2014: 17)

Dalits' graded inequality is more strikingly evidenced by Bakha's fantasy of being a washerman instead of a lowly sweeper. He reckons the significant differences that this would entail for him:

> Bakha had often stood watching this operation [washermen washing clothes in the brook]. In his childhood he had been fascinated by it, so that he wished to become a washerman. It was Ram Charan […] who had knocked the bottom out of that ambition by telling Bakha that though he [Ram Charan] touched him and played with him, he was Hindu, while Bakha was a mere sweeper. Bakha was too young then to understand the distinction implied in the washer-boy's arrogant claim […]. But now he knew that there were degrees of castes among the low-caste, and that he was of the lowest. (76)

Caste discrimination was generally disregarded among Bakha and his friends: "among the trio they had banished all thought of distinction […]. They had eaten together, if not things in the preparation of which water had been used, *at least dry things*" (83; emphasis added). However, Bakha could not dismiss his inferiority from his mind: "'Throw me one' said Bakha. 'Take it,' said Ram Charan. But Bakha hesitated and didn't hold his hands out. 'Take it, why don't you take it?' Ram Charan grumbled. 'No, give it to me, throw it,' Bakha said" (83). Despite their friendship, there was a manifested hierarchy between the three friends. Ram Charan was admitted to be among the higher caste because he was a washerman, Chota, the leather-worker's son, came next in the hierarchy, and Bakha was of the third and lowest category.

The perpetuation of this casteist graded inequality by Dalits themselves, by supporting and replicating hierarchical divisions, has prevented them from gathering strength and voicing their grievances together, which undoubtedly added to their wretched status (Kumar qtd. in Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018). As Bama herself reckons, graded inequality and intra-caste divisions have hampered their unification and the creation of a united front against the real enemy, the caste system (Bama, 2014: 47). This disunity has also hindered the legitimacy of the 'Dalit' nomenclature as an umbrella term representing —or claiming to represent— various outcaste groups. Because of the existence of sharp intra-caste divisions, this terminological strategy was considered by many as an effort to establish one caste's ideology and culture over all others — which is precisely what the Dalits have so vehemently criticised as a plot engineered by the higher castes. Bama's novel *Vanmam: Vendetta* (2012) tackles the intra-Dalit animosity between the *Pallars* and *Parayas* in southern Tamil Nadu. It portrays Dalits' assimilation of the given social system of casteist segregation up to the point of dissipating any trace of kinship or solidarity between them, a situation the dominant Naicker —an upper-caste landowner— certainly takes advantage of. In the novel, a *Pallar* young boy emphasises this internal enmity and division, instilled in them from an early age: "Everywhere they perform Paraiyar arts and call them 'Dalit arts'. They don't perform any of our arts […]. As if 'Dalit' meant only them, not us. We're better than them" (Bama, 2012: 67). This hints to the idea of 'replication and consensus' as proposed by Moffat (1979) since, although Deliège's (1999: 56) reasoning that "replication does not necessarily mean consensus" holds true, it is undeniable that the same processes that are at work between high and low castes can be observed among Dalits themselves.

Not only is there a hierarchy among Dalit castes, as some do 'untouchable' services for others, but there are also clear tendencies to establish a hegemony among 'equals'. Therefore, the tensions and rivalry in the casteist context seem to be an intrinsic characteristic of the caste system as a whole (Gupta, 2000). This phenomenon points to Homi Bhabha's mimicry theory, according to which the members of a colonised society often imitate and take on the culture of the colonisers; that is, they renounce their own cultural identity in the hope that, by so doing, they will have some access to power (Bhabha, 1994: 44). In the same vein, Kamble acknowledges that, "the other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. […] So we made our own arrangements to find slaves" (Kamble, 2008: 87). She points here to those individuals who have suffered an additional layer of discrimination in the caste system: the Dalit women.

Gendered Casteism

Casteism has not only divided individuals in terms of their descent and hierarchy, but has also created gender divisions that reinforce the former. Gender ideology in India has legitimated not only the patriarchal structure, but also the very organisation of caste (Liddle & Joshi, 1989: 69). The specific overlapping of patriarchy and caste is what the feminist historian Uma Chakravarti has coined as 'Brahminical patriarchy' (2002). Leela Dube, in her book *Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields* (2001), explores the intermeshing of caste and gender and notes that casteist principles inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; in turn, the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are inevitably articulated and shaped by gender (Rao, 2003: 242). The question arises, however, whether gender overrides caste, or caste simply intensifies gender relations. Kamble extensively addresses this additional layer of discrimination to casteism, and argues: "Just as the chaturvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since" (Kamble, 2008: 102).

To be female in Indian society often implies inferiority, but disparate living conditions and proscriptions mark significant differences. In the case of Dalit women, their social and economic status inevitably means additional levels of vulnerability and onerous experiences. The prolonged exposure to multi-layered kinds of oppression complicates the ability to extricate oneself from the existing situation. For that reason, many scholars and writers on the Dalit question have critiqued the gender limitations of the Dalit consciousness as a dangerous rhetorical construction of collective identity formation. They have warned that this discursive construct, unrepresentative of caste or gender pluralist identities and experiences, could potentially reduce Dalit women to a hypersymbolic state of invisibility. Given that gender accentuates subalternity, many critics have averred the necessary separation of the 'Dalit woman' category within the Dalit community.

The institution of caste has established a clear dichotomy 'man' versus 'woman' and has, at the same time, positioned Dalit women at the bottom of the three dominant power structures,

namely, caste, class and patriarchy. As a result, Dalit women have unequivocally become 'the Dalits among the Dalits'. Meena Kandasamy has made the conflation of womanhood and Dalithood the central axis of her texts. She claims: "For a man, the woman is the Dalit of the house" (Kandasamy, 2008).[81] It is imperative, thus, to understand and address the interaction of these three structures, to analyse the particular form of oppression they cause —often different from both upper-caste women's and Dalit men's— and the way they have shaped the life experience of female Dalits, both individually and collectively.

Indian womanhood has suffered in general from patriarchal oppression which, apart from generating gender-based inequalities, has established a particular imagery of the 'good Indian woman'. According to that notion, Hindu women had to cover themselves modestly, avoid speaking loudly, fighting, gossiping or speaking too much with other women, and behave as proper chaste women. This image contrasted with that of low-caste females, who were portrayed as loud, uncouth, shameless, immoral and flagrantly sexual figures, which strengthened Dalit women's devaluation and 'otherness'. Thus, the crass representations of the Dalit female body, juxtaposed to the demure demeanour of the secluded upper-caste female body, have constructed and institutionalised stable categories of womanhood in India.[82] Bagul displays the typification of Dalit women as cunning and wicked evil beings through the character of Banoo. She is a low-caste woman who is accused by an entire orthodox village of all the ill fortunes happening in a high-caste family from that village, and is consequently mercilessly tortured for her 'powers':

> The funeral followers were certain that Banoo had cast a spell over Devram; she must have worked some black magic to bewitch him, they thought […]. The

[81] For instance, her first collection of poems, entitled *Touch* (2006b), focuses on the casteist but also gendered basis of issues of 'touchability' and 'untouchability'.

[82] Several scholars, such as Uma Chakravarti, have demonstrated that the repetitive transmission of negative images of Dalit women have their roots in ancient cultural traditions, such as the *Manusmriti*, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, in which Dalit and Dravidian women were often depicted as vulgar, treacherous, dangerous, polluted and evil 'others'. The figure of Surpanakha —literally meaning 'sharp', 'long nails', and the sister of the Dravidian king Ravana in the *Ramayan*— was that of a savage woman who embodied all that was ugly and fearful. Many researchers have initially read the mutilation of Surpanakha's body, at the hands of Lakshman, as punishment meted out by an Aryan male to a lustful Dravidian woman. In the *Mahabharat*, Hidimbi, a low-caste woman, is also epitomised as a lustful being, full of uncontrollable desire. The *Manusmriti* also dehumanises the Dalit woman labelling her as 'fierce, untouchable' with the permanent power to pollute (Chakravarti, 2002). Va Geetha highlights that the "*Manusmriti* lumps together animals, Shudras and women and considers all of them equally unclean, polluting, fit to be subdued and controlled by men of upper castes" (Geetha, 2002: 41).

> suspicion that Banoo had set Khandoba on her husband was a tiger gnawing at her insides.[83] […] Everyone was sure that she was an evil spirit who had taken a beautiful human form. Out of a mania for money, she had worked her magic on Devram. (Bagul, 2018: 2-3)

The image of Dalit women as loose led Dalit men to try to counter it by granting their women less liberty of movement and forbidding them to go to certain places or do certain activities; they also asserted control over Dalit women by forcing them to cover their bodies, all done in an effort to restore Dalits' —especially men's— dignity. This progressively changed the perception of Dalit women from polluting and lascivious to silenced and vulnerable victims of a particular casteist exploitation living under conditions of circumscribed rejection, marginalisation and poverty. This is confirmed by Sujatha Gilda in the description of her uncle and the way in which he treated women: "The more females […] succumbed to his seduction, the more Carey was convinced that the entire female race was born loose, and the more tightly he sought to control his sister's movements" (Gilda, 2017: 115). This image of suffering passive bodies eventually allowed for a conceptualisation of the ideal Dalit woman as a romanticised, submissive and mute being, which largely resonated in literary productions.

Moreover, the patriarchal social set up has conceptualised different gender roles for men and women. In this gender stereotyping —which begins at birth and continues throughout one's life— men are assigned superior and decision-making roles, whereas women are discriminated against and relegated to the margins of different spheres of the social, cultural and private life. Culturally, the expected role of the Dalit female is fundamentally equivalent to that of every Indian woman, yet magnified by her casteless status. Indian scriptures compare females to the goddess *Sita*, who is the incarnation of compassion, the provider of food, and the destroyer of evil (Chakravarti, 2003).[84] This myth has become a stereotype in the popular imaginary and the epitome of all womanly virtues in a Hindu woman, which compels women to abide by the

[83] As Bagul explains, to set *Khandoba* on someone is to propitiate God with promises and to turn him loose on an enemy (Bagul, 2018: 3).

[84] Unlike monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which profess God as male or metasexual, the Hindu pantheon is replete with goddesses venerated as counterparts of the male deities. However, the abundance of female deities does not translate into female empowerment or an egalitarian status for women in Hindu society. In fact, Wendy Doniger argues that "the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous, goddesses are perceived to be, the more intrinsically powerful, and hence dangerous human women are perceived […], and […] greater the need to keep [them] far away from the actual use of any power in the world" (Doniger, 2014: 280). She labels this as the 'Clytemnestra Syndrome'.

patriarchal norms of wifely devotion, chastity and forbearance. Hindu socio-religious values also preached a degraded status of Hindu women, and demanded from them almost total self-abnegation, self-denial and submissiveness, conditions that unmistakably benefited the paternalistic joint-family and the rigid caste structure. Sujatha Gilda testifies that Dalit women were "those slaves of slaves, who had never had a say in anything. Small, frail, weak, voiceless, inferior women" (Gilda, 2017: 48-9). Narendra Jadhav also shows the insignificance of women in a Dalit household, as was the case of his mother: "My man would hastily pull me […]. I was exhausted, but how could I complain to my man? […] In the beginning, I tried talking to him, asking him where we were going. His only answer was silence" (Jadhav, 2005: 29). Dalit women have not only been invisible to the rest, but they have actually tried to be as discreet as possible. They "tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible, hiding themselves from others" (Kamble, 2008: 54).

Consequently, Dalit women have survived and conformed themselves with a submissive domestic position, always mindful not to overstep the social boundaries dictated by their status. Among their many duties, service to others, especially their husbands, and biological reproduction are the basic ones:

> 'Go: make me some spicy mince and a bhakri. If I have to die, at least let me die happily.' I [Sonu] was upset but could not refuse to please him, though I had no idea how I would find money for the meat. All he had asked for was some mince. I could not disappoint him. (Jadhav, 2005: 174-75)

Furthermore, Dalit women have usually been dissuaded from working outside the limits of the household and encouraged, instead, to focus on domestic chores. They have also been persuaded to remain within the boundaries of the customary look of the typical female Dalit; that is, keeping a conservative appearance and their head covered in presence of others. Appropriate behaviour was also mandatory for them, and activities such as singing and dancing were incompatible with the notion of a respectable woman, all the more so if she happened to be married. Jadhav describes this from the wife's standpoint: "My man was unhappy that Najuka and I had to work. [He was] hurling abuse at me" (171-73). He then shifts to the husband's perspective: "To make matters worse, I had bitterly scolded Sonu when she told me of her various plans to bring home some money. That was more than I could bear: my wife going out to make money" (191).

All these precepts represent the hegemonic and patriarchal social view imposed and followed, above all, by caste Hindus. However, the practice of 'Sanskritisation' —or the principle according to which lower castes imitate higher ones in the hope of raising their status and mounting the steps of the caste hierarchy— makes the seclusion of women an ideal shared by all. Bama recounts women's inability to go to the cinema (Bama, 2014: 58), or the danger and stigma attached to a woman being alone or moving freely around (119), thus demonstrating that Dalit women's constraints and incapacities on account of their caste and class position are considerably aggravated by patriarchy.

Extra/Intra-Patriarchy

The patriarchal social framework has definitely governed the Indian public sphere. Furthermore, life inside the home —generally regarded as a safe and private space— rather than relaxing its codes, has revealed itself as equally brutal, unjust and oppressive as the one outside. The Dalit family unequivocally follows a male-dominated structure, and the violence stemming from within the family reinforces the casteist violence at the hands of upper castes at large. *Karukku* contains experiences of caste strife that jolt Dalit women's quotidian lives, a coordinated oppression in which caste and gender are linked to such an extent that it is difficult to decipher whether the oppression is due to one or the other. In the text, violence against Dalit women is portrayed as being legitimised and institutionalised by state, family, church and upper-caste communities, all of which condemn women to public and private vulnerability (Bama, 2014: 58). In *Sangati: Events* (2008), Bama moves the pain outward, from the individual body to the communal body, thus revealing the dangers, injustices, and cruelties meted out against the figure of the Dalit woman, both behind closed doors and in the open. Bagul characterises Dalit husbands "as cruel and unfeeling as a tiger" (Bagul, 2018: 1), and highlights Dalit women's wretchedness within the connubial space, together with their submission to men:

> Fear made her limp. She knew she had broken the ban and was afraid that he would attack her like an enraged bull and then her mother-in-law would burn her with live coal and would keep her hungry […]. Seeing her fear, her vulnerability and the fact that she was on the verge of tears, his lust transmuted into rage […]. Sure that he

> was going to hit her, she took two steps back. And then he leapt upon her and pulled her to his body. […] She tried to rise but before she could get to her feet, he had her by the hair and was dragging her up to press her against his body; he did not let her go until the pressure that had been built up in his body was released. When he realized that he had now broken his vow to remain celibate, rage exploded in his heart. Gathering all his strength and willpower once again, he threw her away from him. […] Her nose began to bleed and her lips and face began to swell up. [This] did not bother him. On the contrary, his fear of his mother and his shame at having broken his vow of celibacy made him uncontrollably angry for he held her responsible for what had happened. The hatred he felt for her made him want to see her dead. […] the desire to crack her head open as one might break a coconut spread through his blood like a drug. He went forward to kill her. (64-6)

Kamble also attests to the violence inflicted on Dalit women: "The furious husband would beat her to a pulp with a stick and drive her out of the house. She was an easy prey. Anybody could torture her as they wished" (Kamble, 2008: 97). She poignantly adds: "Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious" (98).

Sujatha Gilda demonstrates that this was a systematised kind of violence, approved not only by the husband, but by all male members of the family:

> Their first Christmas together, with Manjula two months pregnant, Carey visited. […] he took Prabhakara Rao aside and gave him valuable advice. 'I saw how you treat my sister.' Carey had seen her sitting cuddled up in Prabhakara Rao's lap for hours. 'Women should never be treated so kindly. You need to treat them sternly; otherwise, they climb on your head and sit there.' (Gilda, 2017: 230)

Gender segregation is reinforced from an early age and is internalised by all members of the community, which explains why many women are not aware of their oppression; in fact, they expect this as part of their role as women. As Tabish Khair argues, if female characters are ever able —or dare— to confront the patriarchal/male-dominated structures, in either the social or

religious and economic areas, such a confrontation would be strongly contested by the (male) status quo (Khair, 2001: 186). This is extensively demonstrated in Bagul's collection:

> If he spoke, she could not refuse. She would have to go with him. She would have to do whatever he asked. She would have to pretend to enjoy his ravages. She did not know what to do. She could not figure out how to escape his clutches. […] His savagery was a ghost that still had the power to terrify her. (Bagul, 2018: 36)

As this operates insidiously, children internalise their future gender roles by observing everyday acts around them. They are careful not to trespass gender role bounds, even when they are playing, as Bama exposes in *Sangati*. Bama depicts young Dalit girls in subordinate positions, as passive receivers of male authority from a young age, a phenomenon which leaves a lasting scar on them (Bama, 2008: 31). Bagul also displays this early assimilation of roles through a young Dalit boy's mindset at the prospect of losing his mother: "Who will cook for me? Who will serve me?" (Bagul, 2018: 96-7).

As was previously seen, casteist precepts have conditioned Dalits' access to basic resources for survival, as well as to educational institutions, public places and sites of religious worship. This inaccessibility was accentuated in the case of Dalit women, as the framework of intersectional oppression has crippled their endeavour. Their schooling, for instance, has been seen as both superfluous and dangerous for the preservation of a well-organised patriarchal structure. In *Untouchable*, Dalit women's priority was to toil both inside and outside the house, rather than develop any intellectual skills: "How a round base can be adjusted on a round top […] is a problem which may be of interest to those who think like Euclid or Archimedes. It never occurred to Sohini to ask herself anything like this" (Anand, 2014: 15). They were busy enough fulfilling their duty and following the rules, without ever questioning them.

Education was meant primarily for boys, while girls were expected to carry out housework and 'train' for their role as future wives (Chanana, 1993).[85] Bama illustrates this reality as she acknowledges that, "in the face of poverty, the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling,

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[85] Sreedhar argues that when money was not available in the household, the daughter did not have the option to go to school. Even when there were some funds available, the son would normally take priority over the daughter (Sreedhar, 1999).

and stayed at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores" (Bama, 2014: 79). Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) also attests to this: "My family sent only me to Sewak Ram Masihi [a Christian teacher who used to visit their neighbourhood]. […] There was no question of sending our sister to school" (Valmiki, 2003: 85). Kathleen Gough (1981) underscores that both caste and class, two authority configurations under the influence of Hindu religion, have united to hinder societal advancements for female Dalits, and have thus shaped their submission. Kamble confirms this unavoidable conformity in Dalit women, as she lays bare their perception of themselves as backward and inferior to male intelligence: "'What will the children do?' Then my father tried to 'educate' [my mother]" (Kamble, 2008: 5).

Casteism and Hinduism have been so adamant in their instructions that even women themselves believed in the senselessness of being educated. Satyanarayana affirms: "They had Bachamma discontinue school after sixth standard; his mother had always discouraged her from going to school, saying it was not worth sending a girl to school. The truth is that […] girls' education was not considered important" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 132). Jadhav also puts forth this reality, from a women's perspective:

> I remember the story Tau Master had told us about Mahatma Phule, and how he had faced society's wrath to educate Savitri, his wife. 'Sonu, do you know that Savitri started a school for women, teaching them to read and write? People threw stones at her and abused her when she walked to the school. But she went on teaching undeterred.' That managed to spark [my] interest, and soon [I] was learning too. […] Initially, [my mother-in-law] just shot us a few obnoxious looks. But after a few days, she could take it no more. 'Is Sonu going to be a barrister?' she asked contemptuously. 'No, but if she learns to read and write, she can make sure that our children become no less than a barrister,' [Sonu's husband] replied. 'Then teach your children. Why her?' (Jadhav, 2005: 193-94)

There was also strong social pressure to marry Dalit girls as soon as possible. The fear that they could be corrupted or harmed as long as they were still unmarried or occupied at school reinforced parents' preference for speedy marriages; otherwise, both the family and the girl would be subjected to extreme criticism and dishonour, and the daughter, in particular, would be labelled as promiscuous. Consequently, "Early marriages were the norm, and at ten, a girl

was considered to be of marriageable age. However, after the wedding, she would live with her parents until she reached puberty" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 8). Moreover, recurrent instances of abductions, rape and molestation generated insecurity among Dalit girls and their families, and this further dampened the enthusiasm of both parents and girls in pursuing education beyond a certain age, which bounded girls to their homes:

> It was only for lack of choice that her family had allowed Manjula [the author's mother] to attend a coed school. There was no ladies' college within a hundred miles. Since she had to sit in classrooms with boys, her family made sure she looked as unattractive as possible. [The whole family] decided that Manjula ought no longer to wear half saris, which looked too youthful. All her old clothes disappeared overnight. […] no one asked her what she thought of it. (Gilda, 2017: 125-26)

Therefore, parents' overprotection and projection of fears and anxiety not only limited their daughters' physical space and restricted their interaction with others, but also led to the girls' self-abasement and growing diffidence. In other words, danger made parents chain their daughters.

There was also the general Indian (Brahminical) belief that women's intrusion into the fortresses of knowledge, besides disrupting the matrix of domination, would pollute it with their inferior status. Kuwud Pawde's *The Story of My 'Sansrkit'* (1992) describes the story of a Dalit woman who managed to learn Sanskrit and taught it afterwards. She acknowledges that, the fact that "a woman from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it —is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind" (Pawde, 1992: 24). The connection between women and pollution is persistent. In fact, the belief that women's bodily processes contaminate has been shared to such a point that the expulsion of a woman from home during her monthly menstruation has been commonly adopted across India. Dalit women's bodily pollution meets its doctrinal illiteracy in the *Manusmriti*, which defines them as polluted and polluting, and thus legitimises their inaccessibility to the written text, both as readers and writers. Urmila Pawar expresses her concern about the marked practice of untouchability and highlights the additional impact of her first menstruation: "As it was, people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now, because of this, even my own people in the house would keep me away!" (Pawar, 2008: 124).

Caste, gender, and class were strengthened by the often-insidious play of educational institutions, which tried to suppress these new entrants. Social structures, cultural forces and the educational system operated together to constrain the thoughts and actions of Dalit girls. School-going Dalit girls were, then, highly privileged, whatever the circumstances or the quality of the school: "We could attend school, that was more than enough. […] If our parents were to pay fees, only boys would have been sent and girls would have never seen the school gates" (Yousafzai, 2013: 9). Jadhav's text (2005), for instance**,** is an intermeshing of memories from both Damu and Sonu's perspectives; but while Damu's chapters are written by himself, Sonu's recollection is reproduced and constructed by Jadhav from what he had seen and heard, given that Sonu was illiterate.

Once their life purpose of getting married was completed, Dalit women's predicament would not end; on the contrary, it would magnify. Akin to the principle of submission on the name of caste, the hegemonic gender ideology in India would make them accept their subservient position in marital relations as well. Kamble underscores the importance of being married and having a husband in Indian society as well as in the Dalit community: "we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands. We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her" (Kamble, 2008: 41). She explains the difference between a married woman and a widow, especially in terms of the amount of labour imposed on each one:

> For married women whose husbands were alive, Tuesdays and Fridays in the month of Aakhad were full of activity. A lot of work had to be done. The poor daughters-in-law would really benefit from the grace of goddesses like Lakshmi Aai and Mari Aai. It seemed as if ten days of this month […] were reserved specially for them by the goddesses. (21)

Bagul also emphasises the significance of a husband for the Dalit woman and her level of submissiveness, which he describes as "the blind worship a Hindu woman offers her husband" (Bagul, 2018: 68), or the "devotion of an Indian wife for her husband" (132). The influence of marriage on the female characters' lives is also laid bare in *The God of Small Things,* as Baby Kochamma's —the twins' great aunt— ponders over a woman's fate. She distinguishes between a 'man-less woman', a divorcee from a 'regular' marriage compared to one from a love marriage, and a divorcee from an inter-community love, considering the level of social

dooming —or social legitimacy— that should correspond to their respective parents (Roy, 1997: 45).

A Dalit woman is, therefore, only a servile figure in marital relations, an object of lust fulfilment, and an unpaid servant. Kamble stresses how, for a Dalit girl, marriage meant nothing but calamity:

> When the bride arrived at her in-laws' home, she would be asked to make bhakris. Two baskets full! The child would sit down to make them […]. Then the sasu would call all her friends and neighbours and hold an open exhibition of the tiny burnt bhakris, 'Attyabai, come and see what's happening here. Didn't you think that I'd brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She can't even make a few bhakris properly. Oh well, what can one expect of this daughter of a dunce?' The child was not even allowed to sleep. When the cock crowed at three in the morning, the sasu would wake her, dragging her by her hair. She would make her clean the grinding stones […]. After the grinding was done, she would be sent to the river with a small vessel to fetch water. When that was done she had to sit down to make bhakris. If the bhakris weren't perfect, her sasu would examine the kneaded flour and slap the girl on the face with the unbaked bhakris, pinch her cheeks, and shower a million abuses on her […]. 'I pamper you a little and you take advantage of that! Look what a nice sasu I am! My own sasu was a pitfire. A burning coal. Holding a burning coal in one's palm was easier than living with her! […] Where would you get a sasu as nice as me? You pampered brat! Lift the plate on your lap and eat! You are like a beast gone mad, eating so! […] That's why you are being such a pest!' The sasu would continue the rant. (Kamble, 2008: 94-5)

Dalit menfolk have easily assimilated these categories as images of power that they play out in relation to their fellow women whenever possible. They treat the women of their community as their 'other' —just as the upper castes treat Dalits as their social 'other'— duplicating thus the oppressive pattern. Class oppression interacts with regular abuse at the hands of their husbands, which fosters an abusive environment through and through. Women are abused by their husbands on account of their gender, but also to counteract men's feelings of failure and

emasculation.[86] Historians and anthropologists, such as Charu Gupta (2010) and S. Anandhi (2002), have evinced the logic whereby Dalit men, robbed of their masculinity through economic and caste-based hierarchies, often seek to reassert it by enforcing patriarchal structures and wielding excessive control over women's movements and sexuality. Many domestic fights combine with males' excessive drinking and result in physical and emotional abuse, which creates an environment of continuous violent behaviour (Rege, 1995). Urmila Pawar argues that, "At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her" (Pawar, 2008: 112-13). Kamble also attests to ubiquitous domestic violence: "He would beat me up for flimsy reason… In fact, this was the life most women led" (Kamble, 2008: 155). Sujatha Gilda denounces in her text the domestic violence in Dalit households and women's inevitable submissiveness:

> When Premalatha [Carey's wife] lost her temper, she was hell's fury. And when a woman acted insolently, Carey showed no tolerance. She punched him, he threw a kitchen knife at her. Maniamma got in the way. The knife gashed her hand. She said nothing and waited quietly for her husband, pressing a cloth on her wound. (Gilda, 2017: 255)

Dalits' economic precariousness has, thus, led to a culture of violence that has left indelible marks on women's psyche. This is how Kamble tackles her mother's case: "My aai must have felt so oppressed, so suffocated! And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others. She could never maintain good relations with her relatives […]. She could never get along with people" (Kamble, 2008: 6).

Another aspect that added to Dalit women's wretchedness was the difficulty to provide a son for the husband. Not being able to do so has been historically considered shameful; therefore, taking a second wife for the sole purpose of preserving the family lineage has been socially accepted and even sanctioned by the Hindu religion (Shanti, 1995). The importance of having sons is put forth in Dalit texts through recurrent examples of polygamy. When eight years had

[86] When nationalism was at its peak, reformist Indians extensively applied a discourse of inferiority on their women so as to balance out the one imposed on them by the colonial agenda. In an effort to break down the images of passive and effeminate —used by the British rule so as to justify their exclusion from positions of power— Indian reformers imposed a patriarchal standard of behaviour on their fellow women, thus bringing them more under men's control (Gupta, 2010).

passed and Jadhav's parents were still unable to conceive, this became a public concern and his grandmother, Sasubai, began to ponder over the possibility of re-marrying her son:

> 'You were very proud of your fair daughter-in-law. Arre, even a dark ugly one would have produced many grandchildren by now and made you happy in your old age.' 'We are so sorry for you, Rahee Bai, this is very sad… You have no heir to carry on your name.' […] 'Why accept it? Your son is young, he can marry again.' […] 'What can I say? Who listens to me in this house?' Sasubai said […]. 'I have been thinking about getting him another wife. I love Sonu like a daughter, but I want to see my grandchildren before I die.' I [Sonu] could not take it anymore. I cried quietly, hiding my face between my knees. 'No need to make such a fuss,' they taunted. 'You cannot have it all. God has made you good-looking but he has not intended you to have children. That is all.' (Jadhav, 2005: 187)

Wives' worthlessness for failing to deliver is also exposed by Bagul. He emphasises Dalit women's fear of barrenness: "He's our son, he's our son, but they've dumped this dead body on me. And if something happens to me, they'll toss me out and marry that corpse off again" (Bagul, 2018: 82). In the short story "Competition", he narrates a man's premature death and explains that

> [a]ll this he had brought upon himself out of his desire to be a father, to keep his lineage going. His first wife had committed suicide after only a few days and freed herself. The second had gone mad and had been made into a prisoner of the wada. His third wife —she ran away with another. The fourth went home to her parents and could not tell them anything, for she had lost her mind. The fifth was a mute. She could not say anything. Like the fourth, she too was unable to bear his cruelty. […] he felt he needed a son. None of his wives could give him that. One killed herself, one went mad, some ran away and some died on the way. (113)

Not only does this excerpt highlight the importance of having a son in Indian society, for both social and economic reasons, but it also lays bare the degree that male violence could reach within the Dalit community; a violence that, although often went unpunished, marked Dalit women forever.

As to the interdependence of gender and caste, Leela Dube (2005: 224-27) understands women's work as a substantial contribution to the continuity of traditional occupations that are closely tied to caste. This has a significant impact on Dalit women since the majority of Dalit jobs are linked to the land or traditionally low occupations (Deliège, 1999: 117). Being the downtrodden among the downtrodden (Omvedt, 1979), Dalit women have remained at the lowest ebb of their rank, and have been entrusted with the lowest and most undesirable occupations, both inside and outside the household (Malik, 2005: 102). Ritually 'polluting' work, such as the processing of hides and leather, the removal of dead animals, scavenging, cutting hair or laundering is largely associated with them (Deliège, 1999: 116-45); the responsibility to manage the household, including ensuring domestic water supply, is also theirs; not only do they have to perform such degrading tasks, but they are also disproportionally affected by water-related caste discrimination. Fetching water from common water sources makes them dependent on the good will of upper-caste people to pour water in their vessels. This is the case of Sohini, Bakha's sister: "She went to the caste-well where she counted on the chance of some gentleman taking pity on her and giving her the water she needed" (Anand, 2014: 15-16).

Dalit women's childhood is affected by the obligation to work from an early age, and the domestic sphere —both the one they are born into and the one they acquire upon marriage— unequivocally represents a place where work has to be done. In both *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama foregrounds multi-layered oppression against Dalit women, and emphasises the diverse work that is routinely done by Dalit women, both at home and outside of it.

Anupama Rao analyses the prominence of the domestic sphere as opposed to the stigma and abjection linked to public labour in the Indian woman's case, although she focuses especially on the Dalit woman's predicament. She argues that the experience of labour as not just exploitation but, in fact, degradation, has profound implications, since stigma cannot be valorised like value-producing labour (Rao, 2012). This is because stigma cannot be abstracted from the body, and also because the body is always 'sexed'. If there is a distinctive quality to the degradation of male Dalit labour, this quality attains a new dimension when the labouring body is that of a Dalit woman. When analysing relations across caste, gender and labour, and in particular the social status of the work that lower-caste and Dalit women undertake, Meena Gopal points out that it is precisely the nature of the work they have to perform that signifies them as low, inferior and stigmatised (Gopal, 2012).

Patriarchy / Matriarchy

Caste and gender prejudices dictate most male-female interactions and prompts one to look down on his or her own brethren. Furthermore, the creation and perpetuation of specific roles for each individual, and the retribution enacted on those who do not abide by them, have led to the assimilation of such roles. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2003), exposes systematically the interface between caste and gender within the discourse on the female body. She elucidates that the mechanism of control upon women operates on three levels. The first one is the realm of ideology, in which women are made to internalise patriarchal stereotypes and control their own sexuality, as they would not only gain power and respect in return, but they would also achieve their own salvation. The second level of control is related to kinship, and it represents the kinsmen's right to discipline an errant woman. Lastly, the ultimate level of law empowers the state to punish women for recalcitrant behaviour. Chakravarti regards this as "a masterstroke of genius" of the Hindu normative order, since it enables iniquitous and hierarchical structures to be reproduced and sustained with the complicity of women themselves (Chakravarti, 2003: 72-4).

Men's supremacy and female subjugation are, therefore, not only shaped and reinforced by men, but also by women. There is an interplay of patriarchy and matriarchy in Indian society that results in renewed oppression of Dalit women. Women's internalisation of patriarchal values is displayed in many texts through practices such as blessing a fellow woman by wishing her husband and children long lives, or honouring a girl or a woman with a male title. This is not self-deprecation *per se*, but rather indicates the acknowledgement that one's life is important only in relation to others —particularly the males upon whom the woman depends. The figure of Sonu, the wife in Jadhav's text, is especially illustrative on this matter: "It had been a long time since I had seen my man smile. I mustered up courage and asked" (Jadhav, 2005: 63). She adds:

> 'Why is *fate* determined to treat us so badly?' I asked […]. '*Fate* is what we make of ourselves. It is entirely up to us,' [her husband] said […]. '*You are my fate* ever since the day you made me your woman.' [Sonu] smiled shyly. '*My fate is following*

> *Babasaheb*'s teachings and fighting to claim dignity for our community.' (63; emphasis added)

The assimilation of the patriarchal roles and the stereotypes bestowed upon Dalit women at the intersection of specific oppression, marginality and social exclusion, is exposed by Bagul in the context of female impurity as well. A Dalit woman acknowledges that she "was not to be touched" (Bagul, 2018: 37) during her menstruation. Kamble depicts the state of repression, poverty, and ignorance into which Dalit women were further pushed, as compared to their male counterparts:

> Then one of them would turn to the women, 'And you there, […] take these grains of jowar and distribute them among the households for pounding. Take care that the work is done well; otherwise, mind you, we'll hang onions in your hair. […] Remember, you are not sluts on the streets! So don't cook like them.' […] And the women, pulling their pallav over their heads to show that they were decent housewives, and not like some woman on the street, would say in reassurance, 'Oh karbhari, we do belong to respectable families! We know how these things are done'. (Kamble, 2008: 31)

At home, mothers acted as matriarchs, instructing and restricting girls while their husbands were away for work. Kamble dexterously depicts Dalit girls being disciplined by their own mothers on their secondary position in a Dalit household: "She often told me, 'Baby, you have only one brother. It is your duty to help him!' She would go on and on like this" (6). Satyanarayana also tells how the young brides were taught submissiveness. In this case, the bride's aunt "insisted that she keep her head down. She was not to speak to her husband in the presence of the elders; she was learning how to live with her in-laws" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 47). Once married, young Dalit girls were constantly reminded of their marital role; the mother of the bride would make sure to properly instruct her: "your husband is your god from today. He knows what is right and what is wrong. At all costs, you must obey him. Never, ever displease him. Do whatever he asks of you. Make him happy" (101). Satyanarayana acknowledges that this moment marked a shift in the groom's life as well since, from now on, "no more did he have to wash his clothes himself, or even wash his dishes after a meal. His wife took care of it all" (47). All these teachings affected Dalit girls extensively:

> Barely twelve years old, I was still naïve and knew nothing about the ways of the world. I followed my husband wherever he led me […]. All I focused on was putting one foot in front of the other, and walking behind my husband, following his footsteps. Mother had told me that a chaste woman with good upbringing never walked alongside her husband. (102-03)

Outside the home, women would continue to oppress one another, both as a way of exerting some kind of control and as the only revenge available to them. In order to counteract the oppression meted out against them at home and to exercise the power denied to them in their domestic space, older Dalit women would often turn aggressive and violent against younger ones (Bama, 2014). Kamble describes the traumatic and life-threatening conditions in which young women usually gave birth: "The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably, the vagina would get swollen, obstructing the baby's path… It was battle with death" (Kamble, 2008: 58). Imprecations between Dalit women were also commonplace, indicating that quarrels and mutual accusations of shamelessness and immodesty were part of their attempt to retrieve their lost authority and dignity.

Once married, the female Dalit was subjected to yet another layer of abuse at the hands of her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law. The dynamics of Indian patriarchy and the pattern of patrilocality brought about the traditional Indian residence practice of moving in with the husband's lineage in an extended family network. In India, the household is administered by the mother-in-law and all daughters-in-law must comply with her domination. Because of this strong cultural tradition and the combined effect of economic poverty, many young wives cannot set up their autonomous households. Bagul defines it as the "terrifying mother-in-law's proscription" (Bagul, 2018: 64), and highlights their role in accentuating young Dalit girls' plight:

> 'Are you going to get your honour back by picking up this prostitute […]? Set her down now, drop that slut.' The old lady was out of control. Her hands were itching to grab Sakhu by the throat and kill her. […] 'You buffalo, put her down. Grind her in the mud. I tell you, stamp on her, crush her,' the old lady's face was red with anger. […] She wanted to snap her in two, to eat her alive, to crunch her up as one might a cucumber. […] She was slapping her face with both hands; then she began

> to slap her breast and her stomach. Like someone mad, she […] banged her head upon the ground. […] Sakhu lay unconscious. (67-8)

As Kamble puts it, the members of the Dalit community were influenced by the joys of enslaving others, imitating thus the callous nature of casteist subjugation (Kamble, 2008: 87). As they had no one below them to show their dominance, they began to enslave the weaker sex; their own spouses, mothers, daughters, and especially daughters-in-law: "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery [but] we too desired to dominate, to wield power. […] So we made our own arrangements to find slaves —our very own daughters-in-law!" (87). Kamble epitomises the objectification of daughters-in-law arguing that "she was not a human being for her in-laws but just another piece of wood" (99). She describes the level of abuse inflicted on them at the hands of their mothers-in-law or on account of their influence:

> In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. […] It's because of the sasu [mother-in-law], who would poison her son's mind. These sasus ruined the lives of innocent women forever. […] The entire day, the poor daughter-in-law would serve the entire household like a slave. […] Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask her in-laws to take her back. […] 'Cut her into pieces then and there! […] Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife's nose and present it to her brother and father.' […] Then her sasu would happily arrange a second marriage for her son with some divorced woman with a couple of children. She would feel elated that the harassment she had suffered was being finally compensated for. An innocent girl would thus be sacrificed to atone for the sasu's suffering. (98-101)

Sujatha Gilda also denounces mothers-in-law's implication in worsening their daughters-in-law's conditions, and their utter passiveness regarding the girls' suffering. She particularly emphasises an event of domestic abuse:

> That Sunday, Manjula stayed in bed a little longer. 'Why are you asleep still?' 'It's okay, atthamma [mother-in-law]. The maid is coming in to do the dishes.' 'The maid is here. Get up and put out the dishes!' Manjula was annoyed at Rathnamma. 'Let me sleep, will you?' A hand grabbed Manjula by her hair, lifting her right out

> of bed and onto her feet. Prabhakara Rao [the husband] was standing there like a dragon spewing fire. Then he slapped her face. Manjula screamed. The children woke up. The scene that day is burned into Sujatha's —into my— memory. The terrified woman —her mother— disheveled, her hand wounded, utterly naked, running to save herself. The man —Sujatha's father, her beloved father— chasing after her mother, who, desperate, ran out of the house. Her father went after her. Sujatha's mother ran around to the other side of the well. Her father followed. He pretended to start chasing her mother in one direction, and when she tried to run away, he turned around and caught her from the other side. The children's grandmother stood looking on with pride at her son's display of manliness. The three children […] stood there wailing, scared out of their minds. The adults were too busy to notice. One running for her life, the other trying to take that life, and the third watching the hunt. […] The neighbours […] watched the scene for a while and left without interfering. (Gilda, 2017: 283)

This episode poignantly puts forth the intersectionality of the predicament of Dalit women, battered by multiple sources and with no refuge to turn to.

Female Dalit Body Politics

Dalit woman's predicament has been many-sided, intensified by many disparate forces and pervading every sphere of life. The element that constituted the repository of male power and oppression and strengthened her 'twice Dalit' state is her body. As pointed out before, gender has been central to the constitution of the caste system and there are specific ways in which women's experiences and bodies are structured into the caste order, indeed specific ways in which bodies are gendered. One of the tenets of the caste structure is the clear-cut distinction between castes, forged by endogamous social relations. Thus, in this social scenario, caste not only mediates control over resources, but determines relations of productivity as well as sexuality. As a result, caste and patriarchy act together to gain control over the female body.

In "Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State" (1993), Uma Chakravarti highlights this relationship between controlling female sexuality and preserving caste order. She reckons that the purity of caste cannot be ensured without closely

monitoring female sexuality. Due to their reproductive ability, women are considered as gateways to the caste system and, thus, they need to be controlled lest they 'pollute' the order through 'miscegenation'.[87] Numerous academics suggest that misplaced abjection is one of the causes of oppression in India, specifically for women (Jain, Jain & Bhatnagar, 1997; Ali, 1997; Kanungo, 1993). In patriarchal cultures, women have been reduced to their maternal function —in other words, to reproduction— and their sexuality and femininity have been debased along with it. This has configured women's bodies as sources of both purity and pollution, and embodiments of the honour of the line of descent. Jadhav exposes the symbolism of Dalit female's body by paraphrasing his mother:

> All through my childhood and especially since I started bleeding, I was warned to avoid physical contact with any male. Even if it was Aba, my own father, I had to be very careful around him. And now this man [Damu] was asking me to lie next to him! For all I cared I would remain standing or I would go sleep out in the open, but next to this stranger, never! (Jadhav, 2005: 45)

Apart from encapsulating the family's honour, girls also represented an economic burden that parents sought to trade to the highest bidder:

> 'Who would give such a man their daughter's hand in marriage?' […] 'People do… Jaidev was the owner of hundreds of acres of land. There was never any shortage of food or money in his house and he was a high-class Kshatriya. The fathers of these girls were dazzled by the wealth and then there was their poverty and their pride in their caste. Savitri's father was no different. He wanted a rich boy. And Jaidev gave him wealth, so he dispatched his daughter to hell'. (Bagul, 2018: 113)

[87] The preservation of the caste system has been done, in part, through 'marriage endogamy': one must marry within one's caste so as to maintain the 'purity' of the caste. However, if an upper-caste man marries a lower-caste woman is considered as 'hypergamy'; this is because a woman gains in caste when she marries up as the husband's caste becomes her own. Nevertheless, an upper-caste woman is not allowed to marry a lower-caste man, known as 'hypogamy', precisely because the honour of a caste is closely tied to the honour of its women; if the woman marries below her caste, she would 'pollute' not only herself but her entire family and caste. In the case of Dalit women, the perception of their status in inter-caste marriages has strong patriarchal undertones: while in the case of Dalit males inter-caste marriages are considered an 'annihilation of caste', Dalit women's sexual choice is perceived as a betrayal and going against the interest of the community. This complies with Brahminical patriarchy, as it advocates freedom of sexuality for men, but no sexual choice for women (Raj, 2014).

In the delineation of the types of relations that are acceptable and those that are not, the dialectics that institutionalise the sexual access to some women, and prevents others from transgressing casteist boundaries, come to the surface. The understanding of the control on women's sexuality is, therefore, a central concept in accounting for a caste-gendered politics. Since girls and women are traditionally held as the body politic of honour, violence is visited upon them when the parameters of caste and sexual alliance and behaviour are transgressed. In their study on honour crimes,[88] Pranab Kumar Rana and Prasad Mishra (2013) report that acts such as refusing to marry the man of her parents' choice, engaging in pre-marital sex, or seeking divorce from an abusive husband are all classified as shameful. The punishment inflicted on the 'shamed' woman is perceived as a form of 'purification' of the family. A woman who elopes with a man from another caste is considered impure and an economic burden on the family since, in the aftermath of transgression, marriage turns even more difficult and, at times, a greater dowry is needed. Consequently, many families kill the woman retrieved from elopement or force her to commit suicide (Chowdhry, 2007).

The God of Small Things tackles inter-caste relations and their consequences, especially for those women who dare to marry outside their caste, and displays once again the marked gender bias of Indian society (Roy, 1997). Limbale has also portrayed the tyranny of gender concerning sexual issues in the figure of his own mother: "Ithal Kamble remarried. A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. […] Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored" (Limbale, 2005: 36). *When I Hid My Caste* lays bare the consequences of inter-caste marriage inscribed in the body of a Mahar woman and its transcendence at the community level; an entire village is determined to make the Mahar woman pay the price for daring to engage in such a transgression:

> [this] had driven other members of the family from the wada, including Devram's first wife who had gone back to her parents as she was unable to bear such terrible goings-on. […] And so the orthodox village had begun to thirst for her blood. (Bagul, 2018: 7)

[88] One of the definitions of 'honour killing' is the homicide of a member of a family or social group by other fellow members due to the belief that the victim has brought dishonour upon the family or community. The end route of patriarchal pride, or the false notion of patriarchal pride, is to deliver punishment. The brutality and horror of couples having to pay with their lives, or being constantly hounded for falling in love outside caste is thus tied to a culture where such violence is normalised through narratives of 'the sin of transgression' (Appadurai, 1998).

At the end of the graded spectrum of inequality, where ideologies of caste and gender pollution intersect, the question of honour is rather complicated. Since Dalit women venture out into the public domain to earn their livelihood, they are vilified and accused of having a loose character and lacking virtue. This 'openness' and the general lack of protection of Dalit women render their sexuality readily available for the lascivious advances of upper-caste men, and turns their bodies into the site of assertion of caste dominance and violence. In *Sangati* (2008), Bama moves from depicting a single life to providing a biography of an entire community of *Paraya* women in which stories of female kin, neighbours, and school friends are interwoven. *Sangati* brings to the fore Dalit women's horror of sexual exploitation at the hands of upper-caste men, and displays common patterns in a seemingly random variety of stories:

> The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment. (Bama, 2008: 35)

Dalit women's suffering is ubiquitous; they are agonised physically, mentally and economically. In the Preface to *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Sharankumar Limbale wrote: "Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak; they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture and religion" (Limbale, 2005: xxiv). Sujatha Gilda compares female Dalit bodies' availability with the protection of upper-caste girls: "While many untouchable Christians like to be stylish in this [modern] way, brahmins typically reveled in looking old-fashioned. But the boys would never harass a brahmin girl, however provocatively she dressed or behaved" (Gilda, 2017: 185). Therefore, Dalit women's overall subjugation was not only legitimised by traditional practices but also by taboos, especially in the rural setup (Kamble, 2008).

In Indian society, patriarchy crushed womanhood under its strong foundation. Sexual violence attained semiotic density as a distinguishing feature of caste violence and as a sign of its discursive centrality in framing Dalit identity, even when the meaning and interpretation of violence differed from victims to perpetrators. As a consequence, dominant castes felt

legitimated to access Dalit women's bodies, an —unapproved— access which was often not even considered rape, but customary access. In the essay "A Cartography of Resistance" (2012), Kalpana Kannabiran argues that the proscription of physical contact between upper castes and Dalits did not encompass the sexual relations between upper-caste men and Dalit women, the reason being that sexual slavery is subsumed under the physical labour provided by slave women. Sharmila Rege adds that,

> In almost all regional languages in India the word for 'rape' is equivalent to the phrase 'stealing the honour of' and since lower caste women, by the virtue of their double oppression, have no 'honour' to speak of, the right to redressal is often denied. (Rege, 1995: 20)

Bagul precisely depicts this reasoning as follows: "Is she a lady like you? A woman even? She's a demoness and we should all get some of her" (Bagul, 2018: 11). Moreover, while being sexually involved with a man permanently 'pollutes' a woman —especially high-caste women— being sexually involved with a low-caste woman 'pollutes' a man only temporarily since there are purification ritual processes available to him. It is this impunity that gives upper-caste men the power to regularly assault lower-caste women.

Limbale disclosed in *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* that his mother's pregnancy was the result of rape.[89] He denounces that Mahar women are sexually exploited by upper castes, who remorselessly use them to appease their sexual hunger. His mother was directly affected by this phenomenon, as her extreme poverty compelled her to surrender her body to the Patel of the village:

> Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me

[89] The literal meaning of 'Akkarmashi' is bastard, a child born out of an illicit sexual relationship.

> affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendent? Whose son am I, really? (Limbale, 2005: 37)

The issue of sexual violence becomes paradoxical in the context of caste pollution since, in the case of rape, the body of an 'untouchable' woman becomes ironically more than just 'touchable', and untouchability gets de-activated.[90] This points to Chakravarti's (2003) concept of 'graded patriarchy' according to which women are kept under different levels of patriarchal oppression and are constructed under a semantics of honour, while men's purity proves immune to any sexual activity. In *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Limbale largely describes the casteist hypocrisy and the commodification of Mahar women:

> People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion [...] have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. (Limbale, 2005: 38)

Rape or any other kind of sexual assault have been regarded as much too commonplace, and rapists have often managed to extricate themselves with impunity, since their upper caste works as a protecting shield. In short, the key difference between Dalit women's experience and identity and those of other women has been the constant threat of sexual violence that the former must systematically suffer (Rege, 2006).[91]

[90] This ambiguity is also visible in the use of Dalit working power, when untouchability once again ceases to matter.

[91] The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) has classified Dalit women as 'Dalits among the Dalits' in response to the peculiarities of their deprivation and their location at the bottom of the hierarchy, as well as at the intersection of caste and gender (Kannabiran, 2012: 201). The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, passed in 1989, has also recognised the gendered nature of caste experience, especially in the Dalit women's case. In its definition of 'atrocity', explicit mentions are made to sexual assault, non-consensual contact using the position of dominance, stripping and parading naked; acts that fall within the kind of violence that Dalit women are subjected to in the Indian context (Rao, 2001).

Body of Honour

Dalit women have been regarded as mere objects to be used and passive recipients of aggressive male domination and sexuality. As mentioned before, the female body has also epitomised the honour of a community or household, thereby becoming an instrument of control. Protecting a woman's chastity or, by contrast, sexually assaulting a woman is, thus, tantamount to preserving or desecrating male honour. Kamble talks about those days in which women were kept at home, behind the threshold:

> The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town —a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. (Kamble, 2008: 5)

Due to this correlation, one of the most obvious ways for a man to show his dominance and authority is to strip the honour of those below him by attacking female virtue. In "Caste and Gender: Understanding the Dynamic of Power and Violence" (1991), Kannabiran and Kannabiran explain that gender within the boundaries of casteist society is defined and structured in such a manner that the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity —and complicity— of women. By the same token, demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the 'manhood' of those castes (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1991: 2131).

The disenfranchised position of lower-caste men hinders their ability to protect their fellow women against the upper castes' lecherous manoeuvres, which results in a feeling of helplessness and 'emasculation'. As feminist scholar and activist Gabriele Dietrich has pointed out, the inability of Dalit men to 'protect their women' against the threat of sexual violence and the refusal of state institutions to take legal measures against caste violence reinforces the perception of 'collective weakness and vulnerability' of the Dalit community (Dietrich, 2003: 58). In other words, the assault on a woman implies both an expropriation for the man and an

attack on her entire community; rape becomes just another weapon for revenge, suppression and humiliation against the lower castes.

Kancha Ilaiah (2002) and Dietrich (2003) have asserted that, drawing on norms of dominant manhood, one way in which Dalit men have attempted to restore their masculine agency is by enacting the kind of patriarchal control over Dalit women's sexuality that upper-caste men have traditionally exerted over their womenfolk. Bagul depicts the brutality Dalit wives were subjected to at their husbands' hands as a way of reaffirming their 'injured' masculinity: the husband began "to throw Sakhu here and there, as a dog might throw a rat. Her body went limp, blood spurted from many places, […] but the sight of it only inflamed him further. […] he wanted to finish her off" (Bagul, 2018: 69).

The regulation of sexuality has, then, been an important axis for the politicisation of caste identity, and Dalit masculinity has been predicated on the defence of community honour against the disdain of outsiders. Consequently, the female Dalit body has become a site for the assertion of caste-based pride and domination. In this objectification, she has been taken as silent recipient of the patriarchal notion of supremacy of males and, although this objectification is suffered by both upper-caste and Dalit women, in the case of the Dalit ones the muted voice is not only individual but also communal. Their bodies are viewed "collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/ or sexuality because of the over determination of this violence as caste privilege" (Rao, 2003: 293). Caste, in this sense, is patriarchy codified.

Weaponised Body

Tabish Khair (2001) argues that the burden of being viewed as an object —to be used, bartered, hoarded or protected— seems to be the fate of women across class and caste boundaries. But the condition of females across caste lines is far from being homogenous. Collective violence against, customary access to, and expropriation of women's bodies have proved to undergird the logic of the sexualised violence employed against Dalit women as a critical tool to maintain caste hierarchies. Laura Brueck, in her article "At the Intersection of Gender and Caste: Rescripting Rape in Dalit Feminist Narratives" (2012), examines the experience and threat of

sexual violence against Dalit women and its impact on the construction of their identities, and argues that this phenomenon resulted in the erasure of Dalit women's subjectivity. Dalit women's objectification, although converging at times with Indian womanhood, is certainly more conspicuous due to the additional nuances of caste. When it was time to get married, the father of the prospective bride and the male relatives of the groom gathered at the bride's house to examine her. Sonu declares that "[she] felt like cattle in the bazaar being inspected for defects. Thank God, they didn't touch me as they did the cattle" (Jadhav, 2005: 93). She vividly adds:

> To determine the correct age of the prospective bride, her calves were examined, in the fashion of buying sheep and goats. She was then asked to walk, talk, and sing to ensure that she was not handicapped in any way. An equally important qualification was the girl's culinary abilities […]. (250-51)

Being born a Dalit woman was a heavy burden; but being born beautiful was a curse due to the constant menace of violence and abuse it draws upon the individual. Apart from the recurrent risk of being physically and sexually assaulted in the streets, the fairness of a woman or a girl led the males of the family to vandalise the women's bodies so as to avoid such assaults and, thus, dishonour. In *Untouchable*, Bakha fantasises about Ram Charan's sister and abuses her in his mind: "He had felt as if he could forcibly gather the girl in his embrace and ravish her" (Anand, 2014: 75). More significantly, after Sohini was abused by the priest at the temple, Bakha reflects the following on his way home:

> My poor sister! How can she show her face to the world after this? […] Why was she born a girl in our house, to bring disgrace upon us? So beautiful! So beautiful and so accursed! I wish she had been the ugliest woman in the world! Then no one would have teased her! (54)

Bagul's short story "Monkey" also lays bare how the body of a Dalit woman is often used as another weapon against her. In this short story, the husband illtreats his wife only to rid her of her beauty, not only to avoid assaults from other men, but also to protect himself from desiring her (Bagul, 2018: 62-70). As Bagul acknowledges, beauty definitely intensifies brutality among Dalits:

> [Bapu] would curse his wife. Over the past two days, his naïve, blind immature mind had been filled with lust for Sakhu [his wife]; [….] the desire to deceive and the desire to keep his promises. […] After the last defeat, he and his mother had decided that his wife was the enemy —but memories of Sakhu now tormented him. […] He was so enraged by this that he even considered murdering her and being done with it. (62-3)

The abuse inflicted on Dalit women is repeated in "Pesuk". However, in this case, Bagul painstakingly illustrates the mutilation that many Dalit women were subjected to in order to prevent them from bringing dishonour to the family. They were forced to pay in advance a barbaric price for being an object of lust:

> Her dark hair had turned the colour of mud. Its beautiful velvety texture had gone; it was now matted and tangled. Where on her rosy forehead there had once been Kumkum, there were dark bruises. Her head had been branded, and the scar ran from her eyebrows to the top of her head. Her straight nose was broken; her upper lip writhed with anger, like a severed snake's tail. Rage contorted her face and made her ugly; […] Both her breasts had been cut off. The left one, either by an oversight or because the milk had been flowing when it was cut off, had some small lumps of flesh still dangling, and as they had dried there, they looked like worms clinging to her body. Her entire body had been devastated. […] this woman who had once been so humble and gentle and respectable. Now more terrible than a demon, Savitri was reduced to screaming and wandering around a corpse in the night […]. She was reduced to nothing as the life came out of her. […] She was now devoid of humanity, she was like an animal with a bestial cruelty. (109-11)

In addition to objectification, patriarchal culture has used traditional Indian taboos —mostly understood in terms of caste Hindu practices— to further legitimise the development of several practices that would ensure the continued subjugation of women. The most recurrent ones are imposed widowhood and widow re-marriage. In analysing the practices of widow re-marriage amongst low-caste women, Chakravarti links it with the economic basis of the caste system:

> Both among the agricultural castes and among the landless low castes, women functioned as direct producers and as reproducers of producers. Their continued

> sexual activity following widowhood was in consonance with the larger labour needs of the economy. The caste system as a system of production thus shaped the hierarchy of social practices for women. (Chakravarti, 1996: 16)

In another paper entitled "Gender, Caste and Labour" (1995), Chakravarti argues that "patriarchal practices among the different castes, though dissimilar, are part of a larger structure of caste, production and reproduction" (Chakravarti, 1995: 2248). She suggests that widow re-marriage should not be confused with the recognition of widows' sexual needs, but rather as an arrangement to use the female productive and reproductive labour. This would ensure not just the full productive potential of a woman to guarantee maximal replenishing of the labouring and servicing castes, but would also keep caste structures intact (2254). Bagul emphasises Dalit women's ordeal as a permanent commodity at the disposal of the community's judgement: "An Indian wife will bear everything but she will not bear widowhood. Being a widow is a terrible punishment… far worse than corporal punishment" (Bagul, 2018: 114).

In contrast with widow re-marriage, *Sati* is the practice according to which the widow has to commit suicide by mounting the dead husband's cremation pyre.[92] The ritual of *Sati* is tackled in depth in Bagul's short stories as he seeks to put forth the brutality of it:

> 'Bring that demon here. Let's strip her naked and take her in procession through the village,' said Kanhuji Patil. 'No, let's strip her naked and tie her up like a bull and whip her and lead her by the nose to the pyre'. […] 'Excellent idea. We'll get to see a good hot tamasha. No trace of that prostitute should remain this time. And I'll also be able to say she committed sati,' the Police Patil said […]. 'Yes, burn her'. […] 'Let's burn her'. […] 'Such witches deserve this kind of treatment.' (5)

[92] *Sati*, the Sanskrit for 'widow' and *suttee* in colonial discourse, portrays a righteous woman who would do anything for her husband. Among the different theories about its origin, the sociological one asserts that it began as a way of preventing wives from poisoning their imposed husbands and re-marry; the religious theory, on the other hand, is based on the myth of a Hindu queen who demanded to be burnt with her husband after his death in order to arrive with him in heaven and prevent the *Apsaras* —hundreds of beautiful women who welcomed dead kings in heaven— from consorting with him. Due to the efforts of Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy this custom was outlawed in 1829, although it has not vanished completely (Narayan & Misra, 2004).

The subtext of *Sati* is that women's power over property represented a threat for males and, in order to avoid that, surviving male members of the family saw in this practice an opportunity to get rid of the widow. However, in "Pesuk", Bagul reverses it and surprisingly displays it as a way of escaping the cruel life of widowhood that awaits Dalit widows: "Oh yes, the heart of a woman is a complete marvel. […] To ensure his happiness, she climbed on to the pyre and was reduced to ash. And yet that evil creature could not see her greatness" (104).

Devadasi, meaning 'god's female servant', also called *jogini, basavi* or *muralis*, is another facet of sexual exploitation that Dalit women have been subjected to.[93] They are women 'dedicated' to a temple by their own families in exchange of money; being in the public space, these women are considered sexually available for the upper-caste men of the village. Though the practice is considered a religious service and a 'holy duty', it actually involves temple prostitution enmeshed in Brahminical traditions that usually affects families from the lowest rung, such as Dalits. Brahminical scriptures propound that, through the performance of religious duties and pious deeds, one accrues good Karmic credits and attains salvation; however, a prostitute is considered a fallen woman, a deviant who is victim of her own *karma*, which renders her aspiration to spiritual salvation thwarted. Moreover, though the system granted sexual autonomy to the *Devadasis*, they were actually restricted to the service of the affluent and influential individuals (Geetha, 2014). Gogu Shyamala's short story "Raw Wound" (2012), written from the perspective of a young girl, displays the determination of an entire Dalit family to defy the pre-established destiny of their daughter as a *Devadasi*, and the division of the family following their decision. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu highlight the geographical politics of gendered violence in "Raw Wound", and argue that the *Devadasi* question is not only a manifestation of gender and caste nexus, but one in which "sexuality, land, childhood, schooling, caste violence and family life come into play. So does the desire for education and escape from a power that is upper caste and patriarchal" (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013b: 41). They point out that the determination to fight for one's future is not simply contingent on legal forms —including the eradication of the *Devadasi* system— progress and equality for women, but they also stress the importance of developing political subjectivity based on everyday struggles.

[93] Though the custom of *Devadasi* was outlawed in 1988, according to reports the custom continues unabated clandestinely. In fact, there are still 23,000 *Devadasis* in Karnataka alone. Moreover, subsequent to its banning, many women have been thrown out of the temples onto the streets, worsening, if possible, their conditions (Hyslop, 2010).

Devadasis or *muralis* are, thus, girl children 'dedicated' to a God or Goddess because of a supposed divine call on their lives. This route is, however, generally taken when the family is too poor to provide for them, as is often the case in Dalit households. These girls are consequently sent away from the family, forced to live in penury, and regularly exploited by numerous men. Bagul portrays the harsh treatment that *muralis* used to receive, even from their own communities: "'What does it matter if I am of a different caste?' […] 'I am a Deshmukh. I am not the son of some streetwalker, some shameless low-caste woman, some murali. Prostitutes don't have sons; they only have bastards…'" (Bagul, 2018: 9). Their own families also disdained them, as is demonstrated by a *murali* son's attitude towards his mother whom he considered to be "his enemy right from birth […]. When his anger got out of control, he hit her. Once, he had even tried to murder her. That was how much he detested her. He saw her as a sinner" (11-12).

Apart from being forced to use the only resource left to them as a source of income in the temple premises, namely, their bodies, Dalit women have also been forced to put their attractiveness for sale in the streets. In "Streetwalker", Bagul describes a Dalit woman's need to put aside her problems in order to make a living:

> She went to the tap and splashed her face with water, hoping to wash away the sorrow writ large there but it would not go. The men would not turn to look at her […]. She smiled at the men she saw. She made use of all the tricks of the trade to incite men's lust but to no avail. […] No one even asked her what she would charge. (35-6)

As regards *tamasha* dancers, Kishore Shantabai Kale depicts, in *Against All Odds* (2000), an individual's struggle to break free from the Kolhati community of *tamasha* dancers of western Maharashtra. The *tamasha* was originally a form of traditional folk dance that eventually degenerated into a sort of prostitution. Kale is himself the illegitimate son of a Kolhati *tamasha* and, being abandoned by his mother, grew up among *tamasha* dancers. The writer quotes one of these dancers talking about their miserable daily lives: "'We are dancing girls […], we belong to everybody. We have no right to fall in love with any one man'" (Kale, 2000: 57). As was the case with *Devadasis*, tamasha dancers are also entrusted to this inhumane profession by their own families: "a tamasha dancer's brothers and father went out of their way to attract

the attention of men to their sisters and daughters, so that they themselves could live an indolent life" (64). Kale goes as far as to affirm:

> To fall in love is the worst crime a Kolhati woman can commit because falling in love means breaking bonds with the parents, taking an independent course of action. Kolhati parents cannot allow their earning daughter to leave them for any other man because she is their source of income. (173)

By internalising these values, Dalit women have agreed to use the only resource left to them. However, many have also used this same resource —their bodies— as a defence weapon. Folklore is an integral and self-defining aspect of Dalits' lives. As they are kept aside from mainstream society, they construct their own myths and fabricate their own legends in which fear, fact and fiction fuse to formulate paradigms that govern their psyche. Interestingly, much of their folklore —transmitted through oral narratives that dominate women's gossip sessions— revolve around ghosts and demons that mainly possess Dalit females. This implicitly translates into making women stay at home and not walk alone, which facilitates women's domination through fear. Bama explores psychological stress and strain as the possible reason for Dalit women's belief in their being possessed by spirits or *peys* (Bama, 2012: 13).

However, Dalits' generalised ignorance and body politics prevent Dalit women from using this possession to resist patriarchy by instilling fear in their abusers, and turn these powers into some kind of ephemeral triumph:

> But a single look into the pesuk's eyes drained the strength from my muscles. My terrified mind began to protest. My careful attention was destroyed. My body shrank into itself […]. For this was no pesuk. It was a woman of the kind that created great heroines […]; she had the strength and power […], the kind of truth and beauty [that] made her as terrible as a ghost. (Bagul, 2018: 109)

Contrary to what happens in real life, in Bagul's story the entire area was riven by fear of the *pesuk* and her attack: "if a man dared to go out, he would lose his nose, or so the legend went in that area" (105). Women, on the other hand, were not only spared by the *pesuk*, but in fact were temporarily helped in their attempt to challenge the prevailing patriarchal order (105).

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, neither a simple class or ethnic analysis, nor a communal one placing Dalits as a homogeneous category at the bottom of Hindu society, are capable of explaining Dalit issues satisfactorily (Webster, 2007b). John Webster leans on the classification criteria employed by J. H. Hutton, the commissioner of the 1931 Census, and reckons that the definition of Dalit must, ultimately, be based on caste. As a matter of fact, caste alone has determined for centuries who is a Dalit on account of the social stigma it conveys and the uncountable array of disabilities stemming from it (78).

CHAPTER TWO

DALIT TRAUMA

As discussed in the previous chapter, Dalits have been subjected to continuous structural and institutionalised verbal and physical violence due to the implementation of the caste system in India. This experience of suffering constructed a stigmatisation and corporeal difference from which they have strived to break free by means of different mechanisms.

Way Out Strategies

Education

As Arundhati Roy writes in *The Doctor and the Saint*, "the colonisation of knowledge was a central tenet of the caste system" (Roy, 2014: 96) since sharing knowledge means sharing power. Additionally, on account of their pollution-power and their ontological inferiority, Dalits have been kept away from any kind of institution, especially education.

Towards the end of the 19th century and mostly throughout the 20th century, the British influence, together with the missionary activity, and the rise of Marxist and nationalist movements in India, have unequivocally eased Dalits' access to education (Yagati, 2003). Dalits interpreted it as the pathway for liberating modernity, away from the shackles of casteism and prompting an overall betterment of life, but also as a space for potential contestation of casteist domination. Ambedkar, the most important figure for this community, recommended his fellow Dalits that they should "shine by [their] knowledge" (Woerkens qtd. in Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018: 235), for he believed education was the only way for them to rise above the years of abuse and to escape the 'age of poisoned bread' (Dangle, 1992b). Bama, Kamble and Bagul are educated Dalit writers, influenced by these emancipatory forces, and very much in tune with Ambedkar's philosophy.

Kamble describes Ambedkar as being the epitome of "sheel and satwa" (Kamble, 2008: 123).[94] His relevance in *The Prisons We Broke* is such that this text contains many direct quotes of his, such as the following: "You must educate your children. […] When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. […] Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance" (64-5). Kamble claims that the "young were simply electrified" by his words once they started learning about him. Apart from perceiving a change of perspective in Dalits, as they began sending their children to school, she spots a graphic alteration too since they slowly modified their looks and attire. The idea of education as the only real alternative to shear off Dalits' stigma is also omnipresent in Bama's *Karukku*: "because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination" (Bama, 2014: 22).

For his part, Y. B. Satyanarayana reveals that his father Baliah was swayed by Ambedkar's words to such a point that he felt 'acutely' his lack of formal education and yearned for his children to be educated in school. In a conversation with other railway workers like himself, Baliah declares: "'I have decided to send all my children to school and give them a good education. Even if I have to skip a meal, it's all right. But I won't have them not going to school'" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 113). When his son is finally admitted in a *savarna* school — a school originally meant for upper castes— where "children of all categories of railway employees" are enrolled, it is a milestone for the family: "Thus was a boy of the Yelukati family admitted into school for the first time" (75).

In the Prologue to *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, Narendra Jadhav describes a similar effect on his father Dammu. He relentlessly tried to get one of his sons admitted in a school in Mumbai in pre-independence India and was rejected by the headmaster every time: "Never before had he felt such helplessness and frustration. The only thing he could hear was Babasaheb Ambedkar's voice urging his people to educate their children. Education was the only way to ensure a life of dignity" (Jadhav, 2005: 12).

Education clearly meant enlightenment at the individual level, but it also had an impact at the communal level. Until Ambedkar made them realise the importance of education, they "were

[94] *Sheel* means 'character' and *satwa* means 'truth' (Kamble, 2008: 123).

not human beings", and were only alive in the sense that their eyes "moved in their sockets"; as Kamble insists, they had no awareness beyond this (Kamble, 2008: 122). When Dalits were slowly admitted to schools, the implications were not only social, but also psychological. Limbale narrates the impact that attending a boarding school had on an emotional level, both for him and his fellow Dalit classmates:

> [t]here were Dalit boys around me all the time. Buddhism began to cast its spell on me. […] *We* hated the very idea of untouchability. With our education, there grew in *us* a sense of pride. Casteism made us bitter. […] Everywhere we were condemned. Our houses were in places that other villagers used as latrines. […] Our caste had been thrust upon us even before we were born. (Limbale, 2005: 74-6; emphasis added)

The advent of divergent forces in India throughout the 20th century clearly complicated the upper castes' strict control over Dalits. The alleged 'democratisation' of public spaces —such as the educational sphere— implied certain level of interaction between Dalits and upper castes. However, the fact that Dalits started having progressive access to education does not mean that it was without a price. From not being allowed to study the Vedas or to learn Sanskrit in the past to a clear apartheid of Dalit students in schools, education has been considered as a threat to the status quo. Following casteist precepts, upper castes were hesitant to reform the system so as to grant education to the lower strata. As Arundhati Roy aptly declares, "Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace" (Roy, 2014: 22). Along these lines, the encounters with teachers and other upper-caste students were always an opportunity to remind Dalits of their 'difference'. Unlike Bakha (Anand, 2014), who did not have the luck to attend school in any shape or form in pre-independent India, Velutha did have that chance —albeit a segregated school for 'untouchables' (Roy, 1997: 77).

School was thus the arena for many of Dalits' early experiences of casteist discrimination. This had both a psychological and a social impact on them (Woodward, 1997: 12), and it inevitably informed their process of identity formation: "Reinforced through constant practice, this 'education' profoundly shapes Dalit consciousness and identity" (Shah et al, 2006: 13). Most Dalit writers describe in detail the trouble they had to go through in order to get an education. Not being allowed to attend school or not having enough money to afford it was only the first hurdle; if they managed to get in, the constant harassment and abuse they would have to face

from the other students and teachers would take a heavy toll on them. In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki skilfully elucidates this matter: "Gandhiji's uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. [But] although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much" (Valmiki, 2003: 3). Even after he was finally allowed to go to school,

> [t]he boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. They tried all sorts of strategies so that I would run away from school and take up the kind of work for which I was born […]. This was no-win situation. (3)

Anytime he dared to raise a question or disagree with the teacher, he would be incensed by the fact that "an untouchable is daring to talk back" (26):

> 'Chuhre ka?' Headmaster threw his second question at me. 'Ji.' 'All right… See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation. Go… get to it.' […] The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. (87-8)

Upper-caste teachers were too deeply entrenched in their casteist beliefs to even contemplate giving Dalit students a fair education. When Valmiki's father was searching for another school to send him to in an attempt to avoid abuse, "whosoever's door we knocked, the answer was, 'What is the point of sending him to school?' 'When has a crow become a swan?' 'You illiterate boorish people, what do you know? Knowledge is not gained like this'" (89).

The Outcaste: Akkarmashi addresses similar terrible conditions under which Sharankumar Limbale struggled for education. The village school was run in a temple and, while the upper-caste boys and girls sat inside the temple, the Mahar students sat at the entrance and were not allowed to set foot in it. Additionally, given their status, they were still expected to "smear the floor and walls with cowdung paste" and sweep the floors whenever necessary (Limbale, 2005: 4). During the monsoons, classes moved from the temple to the house of an upper-caste *Marwari* where, once again, Limbale and the other Mahar students were made to sit outside, "amidst the footwear [that] flung all around us" (5).

"Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what?" Bama ponders (2014: 21). And she defiantly continues: "I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study as well as others, to make progress" (21). Eventually, she also realises that her 'untouchable' status complicates things: "however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks [Dalits] in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy" (26). She blames the caste system for her community's inability to study and progress, and underlines upper castes' systematic dissent from any advancement in the Dalits' case: "if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect, they jump up and down as if something really outrageous is happening. They seem to conspire to keep us in place" (27).

Access to education was not only hindered by upper castes, but by Dalits themselves. Many ended up convinced that it was neither their duty nor their right to acquire knowledge. The initial reticence of many Dalits towards Ambedkar's message is depicted by Kamble. She claims that many Dalits believed at that time that "you can't make the river flow backwards" (Kamble, 2008: 67). Satyanarayana points out that in pre-independent India "people found it very surprising to see an untouchable reading a book" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 37). He adds that "[Baliah] was discouraged and sometimes even condemned by people of his own community, who told him that it was a sin for untouchables to read and write" (37). The idea that education was not meant for them was assimilated to such a point that daring to read or aspire to an education was tantamount to tempt one's fate. In the case of Bakha, "A number of theories were advanced to account for the [workplace] accident. Relatives attributed it to his reading […]; they believed that this had brought Baliah bad luck. It was a sin for untouchables to read and write!" (64).

Migration

As was previously mentioned, notions of dirt and cleanliness are not socially neutral in the Indian setup, but located within and constitutive of space. The description of the village in Bama's *Karukku* illustrates a geographical division based on caste hierarchy, and emphasises the intimate tie between territory and caste:

> I don't know how it came about that the upper-caste communities and the lower caste-communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But

> they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. (Bama, 2014: 7)

This spatial organisation has acted as a material context and marker of social distancing, oriented towards the exclusion of the 'other' —polluting— body. It represents a systematic form of caste inequality, and a way of engineering relationships as part of the landscape. Michelle Balaev stresses the importance of space as follows: "Descriptions of the geographical place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self" (Balaev, 2008: 149). Place does not only mean geographical location, but also the coming together of culture and nature, including both the individuals' relationship to the geographical space and how they were treated there. Dalits were not only socially ostracised, but also physically shunned and relegated to the outskirts, which contributed to their suffering. Quoting Ambedkar, Satyanarayana explains the meaning of the rural space for a Dalit: "The Indian village is the very negation of a republic. […] there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity" (Satyanarayana, 2011: xv).

Consequently, Dalits always had to be aware of their restricted access to spaces designated as the property or right of the upper castes. Kamble explains that, if a Mahar woman failed to bow and greet an upper-caste man when they crossed paths in the village, "all hell would break loose" (Kamble, 2008: 52); both the upper castes and the Dalit villagers themselves would direct their wrath at the unfortunate girl. Valmiki highlights an incident in which his classmate and he were viciously beaten for mistakenly eating food cooked in an upper-caste household, a crime for which many suggested that they should be "tied to a rope and hung from a tree" (Valmiki, 2003: 60). These incidents are clear indicators of the kind of consequences that awaited Dalits if they dared to transgress the imposed limits and not abide by the place-power relationship.

Given these spatial restrictions, another strategy that Dalits have employed to escape the stigma attached to their status has been migration, especially from the caste-ridden rural world to the

urban milieu.[95] Migration had such an impact on them that many Dalit authors credit their liberation and enlightenment to the moment they moved away from their hometowns in pursuit of education or employment: “Look at our people in the cities, how they have progressed!” (Kamble, 2008: 66).

Although there is a predominance of rural scenarios in the literature on caste —a fact that complicates the conception of caste relations in the urban space— there are several texts that tackle the protean nature of caste in the city. Sita Deulkar, for instance, explores the differences between Dalits living in urban areas and those living in rural ones. He argues that access to education, engagements in relatively secular and monetised occupations, and the participation in emancipatory movements are more easily available in the city than in rural areas, where social norms and occupational possibilities are still much more traditionally oriented (Deulkar, 2004: 256-61). Dalit texts that develop their narrative in the city usually begin in the village, during the protagonist’ childhood, when caste identity is openly known and acknowledged and pain is bluntly experienced through forced exclusion and violence. Later, it follows the protagonist’s gradual move to the city, initially considered to be a space of modernity, anonymity, and thus freedom from untouchability.

The representation of the village as a place of blatant untouchability and casteist violence in contrast with the city as a space of freedom can be seen in Narendra Jadhav’s text. He repeatedly stresses that the social mobility of his family was enabled by their migration to Mumbai. He depicts Ozar village as a place of inhuman traditions, while he associates the city with heaven. The liberating power of the city was such that it even permeated pictures of Mumbai: “The pictures took us to a very different world. There were so many new insights from Mumbai —wide streets, high-rise buildings, trains, planes, and big steamer ships. We believed that these places must be the heaven that people described” (Jadhav, 2005: 63). Apart from providing plenty of job opportunities for the rural poor, most importantly the city represented an escape from untouchability: “[Damu] had worked in Mumbai for several years, and the city had brought *touchability* into his life, along with an awareness of his rights as a human being” (6; emphasis in the original). Even Dalit women —the Dalits among the Dalits— experienced certain level of emancipation and catharsis on account of migration. In her

[95] Because of the lack of resources, Dalits’ migration to the urban centres remained moderate initially, although it soon escalated, especially in the late 20th century (Morris, 1965: 73).

description of the Ganapati festival's celebration in Mumbai and the attack on the Dalits by the upper castes during the procession, Sonu —Damu's wife— asserts: "We won't let them bully us in Mumbai. This is a big city, not a village" (120). And she adds: "Truly, we sensed a change in the way we carried ourselves. We proudly proclaimed ourselves Dalits, with our chin up, and we looked everyone in the eye" (178).

Valmiki's short story "25 Fours Are 150" also tackles the urban-rural division, and presents the city as the site of opportunity and progress, while the social hierarchies of the village stagnate and fester. This is an intergenerational narrative that describes the transformation of a family once their veil of ignorance is lifted (Valmiki qtd. in Brueck, 2014). The central conflict of the story is the wide split that emerges between a father and his son, thus locating them on opposite sides of tradition and modernity, misplaced faith and scepticism. Valmiki draws a parallel between Sudeep's —the son— physical journey away from the village and his return to it, and his mental journey from progress and enlightenment back through his childhood memories. Both of these journeys, physical and mental, emphasise the psychological overcoming of Dalits' ignorance and dependence, of which this whole story is a metonymic rendering. Valmiki's story asserts that the ordinary lives of rural Dalit labourers, steeped in traditionalism and lack of knowledge, can only be remodelled by modern education and through rejection of customary caste hierarchies.

Yet, the conception of the urban space as caste-free, and the total absence of any complex or historicised sense of caste inequality and discrimination in this valorisation, is also problematic; it sits uneasily alongside evidence that caste is a considerable source of oppression in the city as well, albeit in a modified guise. Owen Lynch explains that behind the idea that "untouchables are better off and more politically active in the city" (1969: 210) may precisely be the centrality of the village in the Dalit imaginary, as well as what one imagines as the contents of 'untouchability'. His point is that the phenomenon of untouchability as a particular form of discrimination is a difficult one in the city, where there is a presumptive sense of inability to articulate or disclose its authentic nature.

However, P. S. Krishnan affirms that although "untouchability has seemingly attenuated", it is certainly practised "with sophisticated concealment in a variety of ingenious ways" in the city as well (1996: 129). In metropolitan areas pain is usually subtler than in villages, and is first experienced within the context of anonymity and the fear of being 'caught'. Nancy Fraser's

(2003) framework of 'perspectival dualism' and her concepts of affirmation, transformation, redistribution and recognition are useful analytical tools that allow for an integration of the social and cultural politics of caste in the city.[96] There is an intricately connected web of relations between caste, class and the urban space that must not be disregarded. Sheth argues that, while the protean nature of caste in the city sits side by side with the understanding of the city as a space of change, this change is often reduced to an erosion of the ritual status of caste, which overlooks its solid residue in the economic organisation (Sheth, 1999: 2505).

While Sheth is wary of drawing binary oppositions between the city space and the village, his idea of 'secularisation of caste' is framed by a particular conception of the urban space as more conducive to economic rather than social change. He understands caste and class in terms of a split between culture and economics, which seems to resonate in the history of caste-class debates in India. Rudolf Heredia gives voice to this argument in his proposition that the confusion between caste and class is one between the different dimensions of institutionalised inequality: "religious, ritual and cultural values are prominent" in terms of caste, while "the political-economic dimension of social stratification" is crucial in class issues (Heredia, 2000: 45).

However, although the urban space is seen as conceiving caste relations primarily as class ones, this does not mean that class actually erodes caste; rather, caste reconstitutes and re-formulates itself within the context of the city, and it certainly acquires new nuances. Sujatha Gilda explains in *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India* the transformation of caste into class in the urban milieu:

> Poverty was nothing new to him [Satyam]. All his life he had been poor. In Slater Peta the difference between his family and the rest of the malas was small. They were all ants. […] But here at A. C. College, Satyam was an ant among elephants. No other student was in his situation. He suffered from hunger, but even more from loneliness and shame. At home, as poor as they were, the Kambham family lived

[96] Stemming from her interest in the way in which economic inequalities intersect with cultural and discursive issues, Fraser developed an analytical framework applicable to current studies of struggles around 'recognition' taking as a basis classic struggles of redistribution of power and resources. In her view, recognition and redistribution present two analytically distinct, but empirically interrelated, strategies for both socio-economic (re)distribution and cultural recognition —such as identity politics. She argues that these two strategies constitute a new dual theory of justice in contrast to more liberal, yet flawed, canons (Fraser, 2003).

> within the limits of what they had. They never thought to want more. They simply lived the way they had always lived. […] His family had made a mistake in sending him to A. C. College. They had been greedy. They wanted too much for their own good. (Gilda, 2017: 35)

Charu Gupta stands by the view that urban spaces are segregated along caste lines and argues that, once Dalits arrive in the city, they are confined to the worst jobs and the dirtiest positions in industry, and relegated to the most squalid neighbourhoods (Gupta, 2010: 312). Valmiki and Limbale confirm this as caste followed them like a shadow wherever they went. After facing all odds to get a job in Dehra Dun, Valmiki describes the difficult process that awaited him when trying to find a house. The moment people heard his surname and realised he was a Dalit the landlords would make any excuse so as not to rent him an apartment (Valmiki, 2003: 148). Similarly, when Limbale was transferred from the village to the city for work, his caste posed such a problem in finding a place to live that he finally had to move to a decrepit neighbourhood, near a graveyard, where "the houses did not have bathrooms" and "the whole place smelt of burning flesh" (Limbale, 2005: 107).

Karukku is also an exploration of the limits of mobility and hybridity in the city, conditions that eventually prompted Bama to resolutely return home —although with a renewed determination to rebuild it (Bama, 2014: 136). The disappointing contact with the urban space, in which casteism proved rampant, forces Bama to recognise the impossibility of escaping stigma. She inscribes this both at the level of content and form as her narrative loops back and forth, constantly circling around the home territory that can never be left behind. Not even when she leaves the village and moves to the convent is she able to discard or refashion her caste identity. She finds that she may leave the *cheri* but the *cheri* will never leave her: "In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear" (26).

Jadhav also reflects on the persistent spatial segregation between upper and lower castes in the urban context:

> We went to the railway quarters in Ghatkopar, a suburb of Mumbai. People living there seemed very poor. Everywhere there were small houses and huts, crowded and filthy. This was certainly not what I had expected of Mumbai. […] We found

> out that close to twenty people lived in that small room. Most of them were railway workers who worked and slept in different shifts. Apparently, everyone had organized routines and they worked well. […] Come night in that little room, four or five couples slept in the same room with curtains and cloth partitions attached to a maze of crisscrossed strings […] demarcating their private space. (Jadhav, 2005: 110-11)

The protean nature of caste in the city must also be understood in terms of compartmentalisation or division between the public 'secular' space and the private space, in which the family contributes to the continuation of casteist practices. It has been argued that caste has no longer been a basis for identification in the city due to the city's liberal aura of anonymity. However, many critics demonstrate that, behind closed doors, familial ties refuse to disregard differences in status and, therefore, continue to reproduce inequality (Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma, 1994: 17; Dube, 1996).

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a clear example of the effects of spatial and relational transgressions in the private sphere, illustrated through the figures of Ammu's twins, Estha and Rahel: "While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws" (Roy, 1997: 55). This alludes to the price they will eventually have to pay for befriending not only a Dalit, but one older than them, and for daring to touch him and to even step into his polluted territory. Their mother, Ammu, and the Dalit Velutha have to hide their transgressive affair from the public gaze, and meet in the anonymity of the night at the border of their respective territories —the river bank, depicted by Roy as the liminal space where only their impossible affair can be possible.

Spatial mobility and urban migration sometimes provided some kind of relief from casteist oppression, mainly because of the anonymity attached to the city. However, as these narratives show, the caste system and its social stigma followed Dalits everywhere, and they encountered new problems wherever they ventured. As Sarah Beth explains, Dalit narratives often progress through a series of "painful experiences of caste discrimination punctuated by certain spatial shifts. […] The broader move from the village to the city depicts an unexpected continuation of untouchability as the protagonist continues to face the 'ghost of caste'" (Beth, 2007: 548-49). Therefore, the effort to conceal one's caste in the urban space does not solve Dalits' social

problems; rather, this only weakens their identity and adds new layers of suffering to their predicament.

Sanskritisation

Dalits are bound to a stinking name and identity and to a set of stigmatised habits which, unless changed, thwart any possibility of rise in social status. Apart from spatial mobility and switching their menial and polluting occupations, many Dalits have resorted to shedding their caste identity. They have tried to modify their looks, adopt upper-caste names, and assimilate upper-caste traditions at all costs so as to escape the stigma and burden attached to their 'untouchable' status and, hopefully, enjoy the benefits of anonymity. They have sought to integrate themselves into the *savarna* world by altering their subjectivity, a process known as 'Sanskritisation'.

The sociologist M. N. Srinivas popularised 'Sanskritisation' in the 1950s as a conceptual model to assess social change among the lower-caste groups in Indian society. 'Sanskritisation' may be briefly defined as a process by which castes placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and lifestyle of a high, frequently 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste (Srinivas, 1962).[97] This process towards Sanskritisation is usually done with the aim of improving one's conditions and claiming a higher position than that traditionally conceded (Srinivas, 1998: 88).[98]

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[97] The agenda of Sanskritisation —originally introduced among the Nadar or Shanar communities of Travancore and Tamil Nadu in the 19th century— accounts for the most significant manifestation of Dalit social mobility during the first two decades of the 20th century (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998: 78). Due to the inbuilt limitations to actually overcome the structures of the casteist social order, Mendelsohn and Vicziany claim that Sanskritisation failed to expand as an effective agency of social change among the Dalits across India. Srinivas used this concept for the first time in his book *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, in his analysis of the social and religious life of the Coorg community. He argues: "The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden" (Srinivas, 1952: 30). Thus, in spite of the existence of evident obstacles, Srinivas argues that Brahmanical customs and lifestyle did manage to spread among the rest of the castes. He adds that this phenomenon is due, to some extent, to the fact that Hindu society is a stratified one with innumerable small groups that strive to move upwards, and the best way of staking a claim to a higher position is to adopt the way of life of a higher caste (Srinivas, 1965: 483).

[98] See also J. F. Staal (1963), A. M. Shah (2005; 2006) and N. Singh, (2006).

In 1927 at the Mahad conference, Ambedkar asked all Dalit attendees to take a vow and renounce eating carrion as an attempt to remove one of the roots of their pollution. He also requested his listeners to "improve the general tone of our demeanour, *re-tone our pronunciations* and revitalise our thoughts" (Ambedkar qtd. in Zelliot, 2005: 205; emphasis in the original). In regard to Dalit women in particular, he asked them to dress like caste Hindu women in special meetings, to send their children to school, and not to feed their husbands if they were drunk (205). At the time, these internal attempts at reform were branded by Ambedkar as 'Westernisation', although they fit into Srinivas' posterior rubric. Eleanor Zelliot reckons that this process of Westernisation could also be called 'Brahminisation' in a broad cultural sense (204).[99]

In *Untouchable*, everything that surrounds Bakha —his father, his house, his neighbourhood— are unfriendly for him. In Anand's words, "The vagaries of Bakha's naïve tastes can be both explained and excused" (2014: 66), and adds:

> He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies' barracks, and obtained glimpses of another world, strange and beautiful; he had grown out of his native shoes into the ammunition boots. And with this and other strange and exotic items of dress he had built up a new world, which was commendable, because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. (66)

The prospect of an alternative reality, in which he would not be treated as an untouchable and in which he could change his harsh circumstances, is offered to him at the barracks. Unlike

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[99] Srinivas argues that one of the many interesting contradictions of modern Hindu social life is that, while the Brahmins are becoming more and more Westernised, the other castes are becoming more and more Sanskritised. In other words, castes within the lower hierarchical reaches are taking up customs which the Brahmins are discarding. He ponders that, as far as these castes are concerned, it looks as though Sanskritisation is an essential preliminary to Westernisation (Srinivas, 1965). Zelliot, however, argues that the Dalit reform is not a variety of Sanskritisation *per se*, that is, not merely an imitating process. Dalits' 'imitation' of upper-caste customs, she contends, is made through scrutiny and critique of the upper-caste morality, and it certainly entails personal transformation and effort towards establishing new morals. Still, Zelliot asserts that a specific idiom of modernity is predominant in this case since "reform, anti-ritual, and anti-superstition is equated with becoming modern, rational and 'forward'" (Zelliot, 2005: 204). Therefore, their idiom of reform does not come to a halt in Sanskritisation, but rather aims at modernisation.

caste Hindus, "the Tommies had treated him as a human being" (3). In light of this, he seeks to imitate English and Western culture by learning how to read and write, playing hockey, drinking tea and dressing like the British:

> Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle. […] And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances. […] 'I will look like a sahib,' he had secretly told himself. 'And I shall walk like them. Just as they do, in twos, with Chota as my companion.' (4-5)

Sujatha Gilda remembers that her family decided to stop eating beef, as Brahmins do, only to convince the landlord to rent them a portion of his house, "by telling him they were among the few caste Hindus who'd converted to Christianity" (Gilda, 2017: 20). Apart from modifying their customs, many Dalits have also changed their surnames, either in an attempt to seek a higher status or to claim a distinctive identity that does not reveal their stigmatised past. Family names associated with menial labour, names taken from the Hindu pantheon, or those that were seen to be derogatory have been dropped by those who wish to escape the burden of the past; some have changed the suffixes to their names, or altered them entirely. *A Fine Balance* displays the curse of untouchability that haunts the low castes Ishvar and Narayan. They are forced to change their surnames in order to be able to escape their stigmatised profession and identity in the city (Mistry, 2006).

The concepts of Sanskritisation, Westernisation and Brahminisation clearly evoke Homi Bhabha's mimicry theory (1984). In *The Location of Culture* (1994) he explains subaltern's compulsion towards mimicry as follows:

> It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of

> roles […]. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger. (Bhabha, 1994: 44-5)

Nevertheless, as Bhabha warns, mimicry gives the subaltern a distorted reflection, rather than a confirmation, of himself. In this case, despite its promise to mitigate the adverse casteist impact on Dalits, the agenda of Sanskritisation may actually lead to "an upgrading and 'modernisation' of high-caste domination" (Omvedt, 1994: 90). Omvedt adds that it forces Dalits to imbibe outmoded upper-caste cultural patterns without seeking any radical change in the centuries-old hierarchical and oppressive casteist structures. It expects them to indulge in self-purification, and to forget their distinct social identity and recast it in the *savarna* image. Bagul depicts this metamorphosis in casteist domination brought about by Sanskritisation: "'You speak Hindi almost as well as we do, like a Brahmin.' Trying to match this display of generosity, I [responded] as respectfully as possible" (Bagul, 2018: 124).

This demonstrates how Sanskritisation reinforces the casteist structural logic by asking Dalits to internalise the very social system that they would like to contest in the first place. It is in this context that this agenda has also failed to effectively liberate Dalits from the clutches of casteism. Instead of ensuring emancipation and autonomy, or what Srinivas described as a 'structural change' in the hegemonic caste order, it pleaded for assimilation and integration of the socially excluded in the existent framework, thus forcing them to live with imposed 'positional changes' under the paternalistic leadership of caste Hindus (Srinivas, 2009: 7). To 'Sanskritise', then, is to evaluate Dalit lifestyle according to mainstream Hindu values.

Laura R. Brueck adds that this type of social reform places the responsibility of one's abjectness squarely at the victims' feet on account of their own 'dirty' habits and induces them into believing that, by emulating Brahminical caste practices, there is a chance of raising themselves out of destitution (Brueck, 2014: 49-50). Moreover, this imposed responsibility could have another detrimental outcome; until recently, upper castes used to marry their daughters before puberty, and parents who had not succeeded in finding husbands for their daughters past the age of puberty were regarded as guilty of a great sin. Marriage among upper castes is in theory indissoluble, and a widow —even if she is a child widow— is required to shave her head and shed all jewellery and ostentation in clothes. Among Hindus, there used to be preference for virginity in brides, chastity in wives, and continence in widows —a fact especially marked among the highest castes. In contrast, the lower castes have usually been considered to have

less harsh codes towards women since post-puberty marriages have occurred among them, widows did not have to shave their heads, and divorce and widow re-marriage have both been permitted and practiced. However, when a low-caste group rises in hierarchy and becomes Sanskritised, it adopts many upper-castes codes, including many of these abuses against women (Srinivas, 1965).

Dalits were lured by the benefits of enslaving others as enjoyed by the upper castes, and strived to experience this power by themselves. The only ones they were able to enslave were the weaker among them —their spouses, mothers, daughters and, especially, daughters-in-law: "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. […] So we made our own arrangements to find slaves —our very own daughters-in-law!" (Kamble, 2008: 87). By the same token, when there was no one to control, Dalit women often resorted to the only recourse they had: to imitate upper-caste women in any way they could: "What other evidence does one need to know how the Mahar woman craved to live like a Brahmin or a high caste Maratha or Patil woman? They, like anybody else, aspired for a better life" (80). Their aspiration to live like a Brahmin was significantly limited by many factors, so they resigned to imitate the upper-caste women dressing style and talking: "she would drape it around her shoulder like a Brahmin kaki and imitate her accent, 'Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don't touch anything. You will pollute us" (80).

Yet, no matter how hard Dalits tried to imitate the higher castes, Sanskritisation did not automatically result in the achievement of a higher status, nor the betterment of one's conditions. In fact, however thorough-going the Sanskritisation of a Dalit group may be, the barrier of untouchability is, more often than not, unsurmountable. As Srinivas acknowledges, an untouchable caste is always forced to remain untouchable (Srinivas, 1965). Bakha's expectations, for instance, are gradually destroyed as he faces the unbreakable economic and societal structure and his status limitations: "But I have no money to buy things'. […] he knew that except for his English clothes there was nothing English in his life" (Anand, 2014: 5-6). To give yet another example, in *Against All Odds*, Kishore Shantabai Kale remembers that, when he was about to be transferred to a new school, he was advised the following: "'If anyone asks your caste […] say you are a Sali' […]. Truth always comes out, however, and my little lie lasted only for a few short days. The teachers and students wondered about me and my name" (Kale, 2000: 125). When his real caste is disclosed, the teacher gets back at him: "'You

will be true to your caste, what can you be but thieves. Nothing and nobody can turn you into anything else'" (139).

Bama exposes the persistent materiality of caste when his brother, a university student returning home for the holidays, runs into an upper-caste Naicker. Unable to identify the young man, the Naicker instantly demands to know what street he lives in. "The point of this", Bama informs, "was that if he knew on which street we lived, he would know our caste too" (2014: 17). Since caste is not based on visible marks of difference, it is possible to hide one's caste identity and, therefore, avoid insult, ostracism and discrimination. However, Bama's brother refuses the safety of camouflage and defiantly responds to the Naicker: "I am a Pariah from the Cheri street" (17). This response, Bama notes, was like "a slap in the face" to the upper-caste man who, furious at the young man's audacity, later on berated and threatened Bama's grandmother, who worked on his land, for the arrogance of her grandson (17).

Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* recounts how his family had adopted the upper castes' manners so as to ease their everyday life. He remembers how his older brother recommended that he should keep his caste a secret: "lest I find no place in the new village. […] I took the risk of hiding my caste, which meant that I lived in danger of being found out every day" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 173). He confesses that he would "constantly worry that someone would find out […]. Had the villagers known my real caste, at best, they would have driven me out of the village with contempt. I shudder to think of the worst-case scenario" (173). Bagul, for his part, builds upon the anxiety and stress that caste concealment brings to Dalits in his short story "When I Hid My Caste":

> When the difficulties visited upon me after I concealed my caste come to mind, memory ignites a furnace in my heart. My head begins to ache as if it is about to burst; in this luck-forsaken country, human beings should not be born as Dalits. If and when they are, they must bear such sorrow and such disrespect as would make death seem an easier option, making a cup of poison a Dalit's best friend. […] This is the extent of the mental and emotional atrocities that I had to bear. If I had continued to live there, continued to hide my caste, the anxiety would have driven me mad. (Bagul, 2018: 116)

The Dalit character is later on invited to a *savarna* co-worker's house for an afterwork drink. This invitation produces such an emotional drain in the Dalit that he narrates: "[the co-worker's] service was a punishment to me. My discomfiture […] that I accept his hospitality was increasing. I was responsible for this and I felt the burden as no one else in the world had ever felt it" (133). The ultimate price for concealing one's low caste is revealed by Bagul: "What woke me up was a sudden rain of blows, falling at me from every direction. Ramcharan's room was full of people. Among them were people who were abusing me, accusing me of concealing my caste" (133). Therefore, this kind of concealment not only causes chronic psychological tension for Dalits, for there is always fear of being disclosed (Rege, 2006), but it also results in harsher and more brutal retaliation.

Intimacy

The private spheres of marriage, family and intimacy were neither free from the politics of caste. In fact, love and marriage have proven to be special triggers for silent casteist prejudice, especially in the urban context; lovers have a love-line below which neither love nor marriage can take place. Consequently, many scholars and activists involved in the Dalit cause, such as Ambedkar, have claimed that inter-caste marriage could be a significant solution to the caste question because of the subversive nature of caste-endogamy —a central tenet of Hindu society, built on the concepts of purity and honour (Ambedkar, 1989). Inter-caste marriage would, thus, offer some liberation for those who do not conform to marital notions in the conventional sense. Sujatha Gilda labels inter-caste relationships as a "courageous scheme" (2017: 132) and adds:

> We talk of ideals. We say caste should go. People should be free to marry across caste lines. Is it enough to say these things? This struggle we are faced with now is not a matter of words. It is real life. (135)

The body has undeniably become a central marker in the question of domination and subordination in the context of casteist India. Guillian Rose uses the notion of 'body politic' as a metaphor for the visualisation of society as a coherent and whole organism —essentially masculine, white and heterosexual— conceived historically as the organisation of many bodies into one body, which eventually emphasises the masculinisation of the public spaces in bodily

terms (Rose, 1999: 364). Rather than being a neutral object, the human body is, thus, a signified and material figure upon which social and historical elements are inscribed, a phenomenon that Foucault defines as a 'discursive construction' (Foucault qtd. in Bordo, 1999: 248). However, it is the female body that is mostly constructed and marked, which implies a gendered concept of the 'politics of body' and highlights its power as a politically inscribed entity.

The notion of the body politic generates a normative embodiment that ends up excluding those who do not adjust to the norm, either on grounds of gender, sexuality, and class. Whatever is different or 'other' becomes subject to exclusion and repression. Nevertheless, advocates of the Dalit cause argue that the body is not merely a site of subordination for them; rather, the body can become an evasive entity and become a site of resistance through gestures aimed at transgression. In this way, Dalits —and especially Dalit masculinity— can embody a threat to the upper castes' purity and dominion.

Regarding the occasional breaking of casteist love rules, Ambedkar acknowledges that the shastras do take this possibility into consideration in the case of upper-caste males, urging them, at all times, to maintain caste as far as possible or else to undergo *prayaschitta* —purification rituals undertaken in penance after breaking caste taboos— whenever impossible. In the case of women, their contamination caused by contact with a lower caste is irredeemable and elopements are criminalised. Consequently, women are generally left with no other option but testify against their own lovers as abductors; otherwise, they risk being punished by deprivation of caste status and banished from their caste group (Bandyopadhyay, 2011). In the case of Dalit women, inter-caste relationships are simply disregarded: "When Niranjanamma heard, she advised Manjula [his sister], 'Forget about him. Intercaste marriage is not for you'" (Gilda, 2017: 162).

The God of Small Things approaches several issues inherent to the mechanisms of exclusion and abuse in the Indian casteist system, such as social, economic and religious aspects, although the one that gains most importance is the interpersonal dimension. Through subversive sexual content, Roy builds a narrative that focuses on bodily encounters that defy authoritative discourses and function as frontiers of cultural and social contacts; the text denounces subaltern politics through questions of corporeality and gender positioning. The passionate liaison

between Ammu —an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman—[100] and Velutha —a Dalit carpenter— and the bond that he shares with Ammu's children lie at the heart of Roy's novel and its preoccupation with social divisions. In this context, Roy's characters question the cultural inscriptions on their 'disembodied' bodies and use them as means of social and cultural transgression. Roy describes this transgression through the body as "a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened" (Roy, 1997: 31). Put in a different way, it addresses the body's potential for transgression in the very locus of its oppression.

The existence of a series of pre-established ancient (love) rules is mentioned several times throughout the narrative, and the narrator warns about the importance of obeying them so as to avoid "dire consequences" (199). In fact, the word 'transgressor' is explicitly used as a quality that both Ammu and her children share precisely because they dare to love and touch a Dalit. Apart from representing a threat to the established status quo, Roy uses cross-caste desire and sexual intercourse as a means of resistance and rebellion against "the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (31).

The fact that Ammu dares to have an affair with a Dalit represents the ultimate transgression in cultural and gendered terms. Ammu's brother, Chacko, is allowed to have affairs with lower-caste women because of his 'men's needs', while Ammu's defiance of the patriarchal social code is severely punished. As Maryam Mirza explains, the social sanctions for a transgressive love between an upper-caste woman and a lower-caste man "apply in particular to women who, according to patriarchal logic, are the repositories of familial and communitarian honour. Cross-class love and marriage, then, present a formidable challenge not only to patriarchy, but also to socio-economic stratification" (Mirza, 2016: 62). Leela Dube adds that a "superior seed can fall on an inferior field but an inferior seed cannot fall on a superior field" (Dube, 1996: 11). After the affair is disclosed, Ammu has to face utter social and familial rejection precisely through the repression of her transgressive body: Mammachi unleashes her uncontrollable rage at her daughter for having "defiled generations of breeding" and having "brought the family to its knees" by making love to a Dalit (Roy, 1997: 258). In her eyes, by acting on her sexual

[100] The Syrian Christians in Kerala have been regarded as a high-caste community due to their claim to descent from the thirty-two Brahmin families that are said to have been converted to Christianity by Saint Thomas (Tickell, 2007: 19).

impulses, Ammu has not just contravened the 'sacred' laws of untouchability, but also those of patriarchy.

Another member of the upper-caste family, Baby Kochamma, narrates the affair to the police as if "[Velutha] tried to, to… to force himself on her niece […]. A divorcée with two children" (259). Upon hearing Baby Kochamma's version, the inspector understands the woman's dismay and regards Ammu as the 'molestee', which coincides with the bourgeois cliché of considering lower castes as 'initiators of debauchery' and the higher castes as the passive victims of their iniquitous machinations. Later on, however, the inspector learns from Ammu herself that "what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched but given" (260). This "concerned him deeply" and prompted him to molest her by touching her breasts so as "to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instil order into a world gone wrong" (260).

This demonstrates that, even when one gathered the courage to challenge history and its fixed guidelines, there was usually no getting away with it: "Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. […] As though they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain" (335). The price to pay was usually such that, when Velutha is imprisoned and beaten for his transgression, Baby Kochamma complains that "it was a Small Price" (336). Still, it was "a history lesson for future offenders" (336).

Velutha contravenes the hegemonic norms imposed on him by having an affair with high-caste Ammu. After embodying transgression, his body ends up being punished through unbearable pain and, ultimately, death brought on by the 'Touchable Boots' of the police. Velutha's body, however, epitomises a different economy from that undergone by Ammu's. While her experience is mostly informed by gender patterns, Velutha's is solely conditioned by caste and class issues. This demonstrates that, although both of them are 'delegitimised' bodies that fail to count as bodies *per se* (Butler, 1999: 243), Velutha's delegimitisation is more acute as it sprouts from untouchability. The day in which Sophie Mol —Ammu's English niece— dies as a result of several transgressions, Velutha is surprisingly described as the only perpetrator and real victim; apart from being charged with abusing a high caste, he is also falsely charged with kidnapping and murder, all because of his low status: "Esthappen and Rahel both knew that there were several perpetrators (besides them) that day. But only one victim. And he had blood-red nails and a brown leaf on his back that made the monsoons come on time" (Roy, 1997:

191). Even Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, condemns his son's audacity to commit such a transgression, and attributes it to Velutha being possessed by a demon as a revenge towards him: "They went to Kari Saipu's House, Vellya Paapen said. The white man's demon had entered them. It was Kari Saipu's revenge for what he, Vellya Paapen, had done to him" (255-56).

The fact that the two lovers decided to flout the 'love laws' does not indicate their absolute blindness to social divisions; they were well aware at all times of the social and historical obstacles and the magnitude of their offence. After making love to Ammu, the feeling of 'terror' seizes Velutha (337), and he attempts to escape the attraction he feels for her: "*Her* children, an insane whisper whispered to him. *Her* eyes, *her* mouth. *Her* teeth. *Her* soft, lambent skin. He drove the thought away angrily" (212; emphasis in the original). In fact, his level of awareness of social constraints drives him to force himself to hate her: "*She's one of them*, he told himself. *Just another one of them*" (214; emphasis in the original). Ammu is also aware of the importance of the endogamous codes that have been instructed on her from an early age. Despite the desire she feels for Velutha, she is constantly afflicted: "She could have touched his body lightly with her fingers […]. She could so easily have done that, but she didn't […] because in the gloom beyond the oil lamp, in the shadows, […] there were people […] watching" (215). The 'people' to whom the narrator makes reference here are none other than ancient "History's fiends returned to claim them. To rewrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (177). Kalpana Wilson adds to this:

> The relationship between Ammu and Velutha is from the outset permeated with an inescapable awareness of history and the social relations within which they have interacted with each other since childhood. Even Velutha's first word 'Ammukutty' ('Little Ammu'), when they finally meet on the riverbank, takes us back to the time when Velutha, though several years younger, used this pet-name while offering his hand-made gifts on his outstretched palm, as he had been taught, so Ammu would not have to touch him. (Wilson, 1998; web page)

Ammu and Velutha's liaison lasts no longer than thirteen nights with devastating consequences. The limited textual space given to their encounters seems to underscore that a relationship as transgressive as theirs cannot but exist in a temporally and spatially restricted

frame. Moreover, the reader is constantly reminded of the lovers' tragic destiny through the non-linear chronology of the novel, among other devices. According to Pranav Jani, "The novel succeeds in its project precisely because it portrays the inability of sexuality to smooth over oppression of the subaltern" (Jani, 2010: 210), thus proving it as an ultimately inadequate form of rebellion.

Roy stresses the transgressive nature and failure of inter-caste affective ties once again in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*:

> There had been a scandal, a love affair in a small town. The man, who belonged to an 'Untouchable' caste (a 'Paraya', Mammen P. Mammen whispered, as though even to say it aloud would contaminate him), had been dispensed with in the ways high-caste families in India —in this case Syrian Christians from Kerala— traditionally dispense with inconveniences such as these. Tilo's mother was sent away until the baby was born and placed in a Christian orphanage. (Roy, 2017: 155)

Sujatha Gilda also brings to the fore the fact that the alterity and 'otherness' between members of different castes do not dissipate in cross-caste intimacy:

> Carey saw her breast silhouetted by the evening light. He couldn't help sneaking up behind her to feel it, startling her. A hullabaloo broke out when the caste men saw this. An untouchable kid cupping a caste girl's breast, and in a temple no less. They ran up the temple stairs and surrounded him. […] Carey could have gotten his whole family killed over such an episode. He knew he couldn't let a thing like that ever happen again. (Gilda, 2017: 121)

As these texts demonstrate, personal relationships in India are still largely dominated by age-old traditions and customs associated with the caste system. Inter-caste unions are seen as breaking up centuries-old traditions and complicating the hierarchical system. This kind of relationships brings many difficulties and challenges for the couple and their families: the strain on the family name, honour, reputation, as well as purity, are concerns for many. In any case, the staunch supporters and guardians of the system will never let this go easily, as this threatens the preservation of control and order.

Conversion

Countless studies have shown that most Dalits have internalised many of the regulations dictated by the caste system, yet, Dalit literature depicts various ways of assertion and resistance that they employed so as to counter them; as Foucault argued, "where there is power, there is resistance" (1978: 95-6). The caste system held society in a metaphysical engagement and, at the same time, in physical alienation with itself. Since this superstructure was pivoted on a religio-ideological foundation, one of the main manifestations of resistance has used the very religious resources that contrived its arguments. Right from the early revolts, religious opposition has been frequently articulated in India —including the *bhakti* movement in the medieval age— although it intensified in the pre- and mostly post-independence period.

Under the influence of liberal ideas, Ambedkar believed that Hindus are victims of a wrong faith. He considered that "A Hindu is not free to use his reasoning faculty" (Ambedkar, 1989: 299). India, according to him, is a place where "the priest holds sway over the common man often greater than that of the magistrate, and where everything, even such things as strikes and elections, so easily takes a religious turn" (227). For that reason, "it is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which […] the caste system is founded" (Ambedkar qtd. in Roy, 2014: 188). What is more, since the suffering that Dalits have to endure is subsumed under the oppression propagated by the Hindu religion, it is necessary to emancipate their minds from the shackles of the wrong faith and irrational beliefs, which, as Ambedkar pondered, could only be achieved by political means. For that, he promoted the disavowal and destruction of the Vedas and shastras (Ambedkar, 1989: 297).[101] He was also convinced that the lost rights could only be regained through the struggle of those affected by this, as the Hindus had vested interests in continuing this pernicious system. The tensions surrounding this issue escalated in 1935 when Ambedkar announced: "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu" (Ambedkar qtd. in Moon, 2002: 430).[102]

[101] When Ambedkar wrote *Annihilation of Castes*, in 1936, he argued that castes were rooted in the Hindu *Dharmshastras* or Hindu sacred books and, unless they were destroyed, annihilation of castes was not possible. Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (2002) is an instance of the love-hate relationship between the Hindu religion and the Dalit community. He argues that if the upper-caste Hindus had conceded Ambedkar's demand, he would not have spoken the language of conversion (Ilaiah, 2002).

[102] In response to Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, Gandhi wrote in *Harijan* that caste has nothing to do with religion as the caste system grants the same importance and reward to Brahmins as to scavengers (Gandhi qtd. in

Anti-Hinduism advocates, Ambedkar among them, argued that the rules of the Hindu religion were meticulous enough to leave no possibility for an 'untouchable' to pose as a 'touchable'. Therefore, for a Dalit to say that s/he believes in Hinduism would mean that s/he accepts his/her status as an 'untouchable' as a result of divine dispensation. "What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is!" Kamble exclaimed in *The Prisons We Broke* (2008: 56). She displays this dichotomy in Dalits by explaining that, although "Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits", "Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts" (18). She recalls that, while growing up in Veergaon, Dalits naïvely spent their time in the "senseless worship of stones" (11), praying to deaf ears in the hope of a better future.

While some Dalits have attempted to exert resistance from within the boundaries of Hinduism, others have completely relocated. Considering Hinduism as the primary source of their woes, many imagined conversion as the road to their emancipation. Because of this, the political dimension of Dalit conversion often overstepped spiritual motivation. Narendra Jadhav narrates that the orthodox Hindus' utter objection to open the temple to Dalits led Dalit protesters to try to convince their fellows to renounce Hinduism: "If Hindus do not treat us as equals, what is the point in subscribing to the Hindu religion?' […] A Brahmin who sympathized with the untouchables had been badly beaten by highborn bullies" (Jadhav, 2005: 158).

Since the emancipation of the entire Dalit community was complicated by their lack of political leadership, fear of violence and stigmatisation, individual strategies were more plausible. Religious conversion not only provided a path for reconfiguring social frameworks and improving social positions, but it also offered an opportunity to reject hierarchies and enact

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Ambedkar, 1989: 326). He also accused Ambedkar of using unauthentic religious texts in order to defend his argument and of purposefully judging Hinduism by its worst representatives. Ambedkar replied that "The masses do not make any distinction between texts which are genuine and texts which are interpolations. […] They are too illiterate to know the contents of the shastras. They have believed what they have been told, and what they have been told is that the shastras do enjoin as a religious duty the observance of caste and untouchability" (336). In reaction to Gandhi's proposal to look at the good specimens of Hinduism instead of the worst, apart from arguing that the worse are more than the better, Ambedkar remarked that "The best of men cannot be moral if the basis of relationship between them and their fellows is fundamentally a wrong relationship. To a slave, his master may be better or worse. But there cannot be a good master. A good man cannot be a master, and a master cannot be a good man. The same applies to the relationship between high caste and low caste. To a low-caste man, a high-caste man can be better or worse as compared to other high-caste men. A high-caste man cannot be a good man, in so far as he must have a low caste man to distinguish him as a high-caste man" (341).

resistance and assertion on an individual level (Gupta, 2014: 661). This prospect of an alternative positive identity, social acceptance, human dignity and equality attracted many Dalits who converted believing that this will make their low status wither away.

Histories of personal struggles and indignities, as well as the sense of being peripheral, are systematically recorded in Dalit narratives, and one of their pervasive themes is religion. Authors often pinpoint religion's innate mechanisms for the establishment, perpetuation and consolidation of Dalits' oppression through its dogmas, myths, and rituals. They portray the effect it has had on the economic, social, political, mental, and moral spheres of Indian society, and how it has developed into a potency for subjugation. The search for alternative religious identities has become a crucial aspect of Dalit activism in the past hundred years.

One of the alternative agendas that emerged in tune with this feeling is the articulation of Ad Dharm religious philosophy —the original but lost Dalit religion. This was built on the indigenous and pre-Aryan Indian cultural heritage, over whom the Aryan alien power established their rule while systematically destroying their culture and forcing them to adopt their religion. In keeping with this, many Dalits claim that they are not originally Hindus, but have acquired such religious identities by way of forced conversion at some point during their long history of social domination. It is on this background that the adherence of Dalits to Ad Dharm could be considered as their 'homecoming', or a retrieval of their lost native religion. The task of revivification of the lost indigenous religion, however, was made cumbersome by the fact that, during the alleged long period of persecution at the hands of the caste Hindus, the outcastes had not only forgotten their cultural heritage, but had also come to believe that the religion of the invaders was their own. Thus, to revive Ad Dharm was tantamount to developing a new religion for Dalits altogether.[103]

The first real impact of the rejection of Hinduism on the caste system took place in medieval times. Because of the influence that Islam was acquiring across India in that period, the Hindu downtrodden castes embraced it due to its promise of equality in status. Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* acknowledges that many Dalits in his village converted to Islam in their search for self-respect. Furthermore, "Revenue and police officials offered incentives such as a pair

[103] The Ad Dharm leadership was successful in its objective of reviving Dalits' native religion by getting it recognised by the British government as a fully-fledged religion pertaining to the downtrodden.

of new white robes, food and even land to aid conversions. Many untouchable families were converted in masse" (Satyanarayana, 2011: 69).

The emancipatory aspect of Islam was soon forgotten as the Muslim community's internal heterogeneity fostered the creation of caste-like social stratification and discrimination based on lineage and birth, thus complicating the definition of Muslim identity based solely on religion.[104] As Arundhati Roy informs in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "'They are mostly poor, low-caste boys —yes, for your kind information even we Muslims happily practise caste" (Roy, 2017: 225). Dalit converts were, therefore, placed in a position analogous to their pre-conversion status. As Romila Thapar concludes, "In spite of its egalitarian philosophy, the influence of Islam did not lead to the disappearance of caste" (Thapar, 1996a: 253), and the fact that it succumbed to caste society reduced its social dynamism and affected its label of 'radical project of social liberation'.[105]

As was previously mentioned, concluding that Hindu reform was impossible due to its fundamentally unequal and hierarchical nature, Ambedkar urged his followers to leave Hinduism and re-convert. Initially, he had rejected the option of converting to Buddhism and Arya Samaj,[106] and indicated his preference for Christianity or Islam:

[104] The majority of Indian Muslims were converts from Hindu lower and occupational castes. Their conversion, Bennur points out (2003), was a result of the Sufis' preaching of Islamic principles of equality and brotherhood. They rejected the principle of purity and pollution and human inequality, but they could not get rid of those casteist features that were deeply entrenched in the psyche and social life of the people. The categories of Ashraf (noble born or upper class), Atraf (common class) and Ajlaf (low born) are a result of this phenomenon (Chowdhury, 2009: 8). Therefore, the conversion process altered the caste system but could not annihilate it. Ajlafs were mostly descendants of converts from Hindu lower castes and Ashrafs and their descendants, like high-caste Hindus, regarded menial work as morally degrading (9). Moreover, Bennur (2003) observes that even though the term 'caste' is not used with reference to Muslims, the nature of the *Jamat* or *biradari* is almost the same as caste, as it possesses all the traits of the caste system —endogamy, dress-code, separate mosques, occupation-based groups, hierarchy, stratification, and so on. Consequently, the Islamic principle of equality is observed only in the religious domain (Engineer, 2004: 3984). The story of conversion to Sikhism is not different either. Although the Sikh reformers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries preached in favour of removing untouchability, no strenuous efforts were made in that direction. Dalits embraced Sikhism in the hope of attaining social equality, but social opprobrium has continued to afflict them (Harish, 2003: 2697).

[105] The origins of backward Muslim consciousness can be traced back to the colonial period, although the Kaka Kalelkar Backward Classes Commission (1955) was the first to recognise the fact that there were backward castes among Muslims and that they were at par with their Hindu counterparts (Mondal, 2003: 4894).

[106] Arya Samaj is a reform movement of modern Hinduism, founded in 1875 by Dayananda Sarasvati, whose main aim was to re-establish the Vedas. The Arya Samaj opposes, among many other Hindu practices, caste based upon birth rather than upon merit, and also untouchability. Among its initiatives are promoting female education and inter-caste marriage. It has been accused, however, of being overly dogmatic and militant and of exhibiting an aggressive intolerance towards both Christianity and Islam (Britannica, web page).

> By becoming Buddhist or Arya Samajist, there is not going to be any significant impact on the prejudices of the people who call themselves as belonging to upper varna […] and therefore we do not see much sense in accepting that path. If we want to successfully confront the prejudices of Hindus, we have to convert to either Christianity or Islam in order to secure the backing of some rebellious community. It is only then the blot of Untouchability will be washed off. (Ambedkar qtd. in Moon, 1990: 76)

Having considered other options, he finally turned to Buddhism so as "to build a cultural politics of dis-identification vis-à-vis Hindu society" (Nagaraj, 2010: 69). Besides being the most compatible one with modern rationality and science among religions, Ambedkar argued that Buddhism is the original spiritual path of Indian indigenous tribes (Ambedkar, 2004: 7-8). There was, thus, a belief that the only Indian religion which arose and grew out of the struggle against the caste system, and never succumbed to it, was Buddhism, while the rest had compromised with casteism (Keer, 1971: 498).[107]

Ambedkar first announced his intention to convert to Buddhism in 1935; but it was in 1956, a short time before his death, that a mass conversion of about 50,000 Dalits to Buddhism led by Ambedkar took place, thus posing a direct challenge to Hindu domination. Ambedkar used Buddhism as a weapon for social revolt by reinterpreting its tenets so as to further his mission of establishing a just and egalitarian society. His form of Buddhism sought to subvert old definitions and forge a new consciousness and creativity, placing much emphasis on self-transformation (Omvedt, 2008: 16) —a process that Margo Perkins (2000) has called 'rewriting the self'.[108] This rewriting and reclaiming of the self and the past, as Frantz Fanon argued,

[107] Ambedkar conceived Buddhism as a path to bring about revolutionary change —although it actually did not fight any Hindu precept. The Buddhologist Erik Zürcher writes: "In modern popularizing writings, one often reads that 'egalitarian' Buddhism was essentially a 'protest movement' against the Brahmanical caste system. It is true that the Buddhist view of caste is different from and more rational than the religious justification which one finds in Brahmanism. But neither the Buddha himself, nor any pre-modern Buddhist teacher after him has combated the caste system" (Zürcher, 1974: 49).

[108] Guy Welbon, Laura Jenkins and Gary Tartakov offer essays in this spirit. Welbon tackles the beginnings of the Buddhist tradition to examine its early relationships with the low castes (Welbon, 2009). Studying women converts in Maharashtra, Jenkins writes about more modern Buddhists and points to the changes in attitudes and choices epitomised by the educational empowerment of Dalits led by Buddhism (Jenkins, 2009). Tartakov picks up this point and moves to a research of the ways in which Ambedkar's followers reinterpreted older Buddhist iconography to create innovative ways of expressing their identity (Tartakov, 2009).

“triggers a change of fundamental importance in the [subaltern] psycho-affective equilibrium” (Fanon, 2004: 148). This Fanonian ‘psycho-affective equilibrium’ is analogous to Michel Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ which permit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault, 1988: 18). A similar change can be discerned in the Buddhist process of self-recovery undergone by Dalits.

Conversion was not merely a practical matter, but it mostly aimed at having some psychological impact. In fact, Eleanor Zelliot showcases that all classes of converted Buddhists found relief in their act of conversion, as it provided “a fresh sense of identity and a newly acquired confidence” (Zelliot, 2001b: 219). Zelliot describes Buddhist conversion as ‘a moral force’ (Zelliot, 2005: 195) with “profoundly satisfying psychological meaning” consisting in a sense of pride in Buddhism, love and respect for Ambedkar, and “freedom from the sense of being a polluting person” (218-19); a “process of self-purification of those practices which ‘justified’ the untouchability of the Untouchable” (131).

In addition to challenging previous casteist relations, Ambedkar’s movement also influenced interactions between Dalits themselves and offered them a unity previously lacking. Limbale underlines the pivotal role that Buddhism has played in the lives of Dalits and the epiphany it meant for them:

> A generation of militant youths generated by the movement also threatened the Hindus and the thought of untouchables living contented lives with jobs made available to them, irritated them. Dalits refused to do the lowly jobs that they once did for Hindus. Such changes in the Dalit community occurred with their conversion to Buddhism. (Limbale, 2005: 103)

However, apostasy from Hinduism into Buddhism not always translated into better conditions. First of all, not all Dalits converted voluntarily or consciously. In the case of Dalit women, for instance, many were converted by association with the father or the husband. This can be seen in Narendra Jadhav’s text:

> I [Sonu] said that I would not mind worshipping [Buddha] provided they did not make me throw away our traditional gods. Why couldn't they allow Buddha to be placed in our temples along with other deities? […] 'Soney, I have explained to you… that will not be possible,' my man shouted. 'When we take up this new religion, you will have to put away all those Hindu gods.' […] Here was my man, happy to convert. For him, Babasaheb was always right: he had done the thinking for all of us, and had opted for conversion only after being convinced that Buddhism was good for us. He repeated Babasaheb's argument: 'Buddhism has no priestly class and certainly nobody is considered untouchable. All men and all women are equal, and they are treated as such.' (Jadhav, 2005: 219)

This conversion by proxy undoubtedly deprived Dalit women of any kind of agency (Jenkins, 2009: 161). Zelliot adds that conversion did not actually extend to the material poverty endured by the Dalit community as a whole since most of them continued to live under the same deplorable conditions (Zelliot, 2001b: 219). Jadhav describes Sonu's thoughts when they were "about to cross a different kind of border" (2005: 223): "We were going to leave the boundaries of Hinduism and, led by Babasaheb, enter the new religion […]. I still had doubts about Buddhism and what it would actually do for us" (223).

Additionally, Jenkins underlines the variety of reactions towards Dalit Buddhists and argues that many Hindus, and even upper-caste Buddhists, persisted in considering them low-caste after conversion, or even diminishing their Buddhist status, by calling them 'neo-Buddhists' (Jenkins, 2009: 162). However, one of the most considerable consequences of conversion to Buddhism was, ironically, a legal matter. At its inception in 1950, the Indian Constitution recognised only Hindu Dalits under the definition of 'Scheduled Castes'. Six years later, the constitutional order was amended to include Sikh Dalits but exclude those converted to Buddhism. Thus, their conversion to Buddhism caused them the loss of their legal status as Scheduled Castes and, thereby, of most constitutional benefits of reservations, including economic and political development. It took the constitutional order another thirty-four years to be amended again in 1990 to include Dalit converts to Buddhism (Deshpande, 2003).

Encoding dissent, resistance and assertion, religious conversions have thus been one of the common expedients of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Although there are evidences of Christian settlements in India as early as the 2nd century, the Christian missionary activity

affected Dalits especially from the 19th century onwards (Ambedkar, 2017: 115). One of the significant results of the interaction between Dalits and the Christian missionaries has been the articulation of a new Dalit consciousness. In addition to improving Dalits' socio-economic position, this consciousness found expression in social movements that problematised many aspects of their subordination. Conversion to Christianity was often used as a threat to demand more rights from the Hindu society and, precisely because of this, many voices, including that of Gandhi, have accused Dalits of converting mostly driven by material needs —like shelter, employment and protection— rather than spirituality (Balasundaram, 1997: 168). This is often reflected in literature. Shivaram Karanth's novel *Choma's Drum*, for instance, puts forth the predicament of a Dalit that considers conversion to Christianity primarily for the purpose of land acquisition, a right denied to him (Karanth, 1978: 47-8). Narendra Jadhav also mentions that Christian missionaries offered Dalits money in exchange of converting, a fact that enraged Ambedkar: "He announced that we did not seek anybody's charity: the Dalits wanted to work hard and earn their bread with dignity" (Jadhav, 2005: 218).

Missionaries proffered conversion as the biggest boon for outcastes as it aimed at raising them socially, intellectually, morally and spiritually, and at bringing them at par with "the best Christians from the upper classes" (Webster, 2007a: 179). This quickly changed: during British occupation, missionaries often worked hand-in-hand with anthropologists and Crown administrators in producing colonial knowledge about India and its correspondent systems of control. Such representations collectively emphasised the 'corrupt' and 'idolatrous' nature of Hinduism and the 'barbarism' of tribal groups, and produced images of savagery in support of the mandates to 'civilise' and Christianise the Indian masses. This created the image of missionaries as bringers of culture, while it perpetuated a stereotypical and patronising portrait of Dalits.

Therefore, no matter to which religion conversion took place, conversion was always problematic, as caste was invariably carried over to the other religion and the upper castes within every religious community were the ones who continued to exercise power (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2018: 107). *Karukku* (2014) tells the story of Bama, a Tamil Dalit girl converted to Christianity. Idealistically believing that the Catholic Church will offer her a life of dignity and a means of alleviating the sufferings of others in her community, Bama enters a convent to become a nun, only to discover a deep rift between Christian preaching and practice. Becoming painfully aware of this gap, Bama bitterly notes that the nuns "claimed that God's

love is limitless, subject to no conditions. Yet inside the convent there were innumerable conditions about how you should be and who you were in order to deserve their love" (106). Not only did this conversion fail to provide an escape from casteist discrimination for Dalits, but even bestowed on them further disadvantages. Dalit women suffered the impossibility to annul a marriage, remarry after widowhood or desert their husbands: "Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we're all [Hindu or Christian Dalit women] in the same position" (Bama, 2008: 97).

Anand tackles Dalits' conversion to Christianity, not as a probable solution to untouchability, but rather to satirise it through the figures of Colonel Hutchinson and his wife, Mary. As Bakha listens to the missionary's Christian songs, he feels overwhelmed and confused. Not getting any straight answers to his questions —such as who 'Yessuh Missih' is and why he is different from Rama, the Hindu god— he soon becomes bored (Anand, 2014: 114). He also has troubles understanding why he was born a sinner when he has no recollection of ever committing a sin:

> He didn't like the idea of being called a sinner. He had committed no sin that he could remember. How could he confess his sins? […] He didn't want to go to Heaven. As a Hindu he didn't believe in the judgement day. […] He had seen people die. And he had just accepted the fact. He had been told that people who died were reborn in some form or other. (114)

When Bakha is invited by the missionary to his house so as to continue with the recruitment process, the missionary's wife, Mary, unlike her husband, treats Bakha as a lowly creature. She also takes the occasion to refer to Dalits in general as "dirty, black Untouchables […], nigger servants" (106) and "dirty bhangis and chamars" (116). In fact, Anand pinpoints that the few words the 'sahibs' used to learn in Hindustani were "acha" (good), "jao" (go away), "jaldi karo" (be quick), "sur ka bacha" (son of a pig), and "kute ka bacha" (son of a dog) (108). Bakha recognises the look on Mary's face since it reminds him of the look of contempt of the 'touched man' earlier that day. However, Anand underlines that the Colonel's wife frightened Bakha much more, "for she was a mem-sahib, and the frown of a mem-sahib had the strange quality of unknown, uncharted seas of anger behind it" (117). Anand justifies this by arguing that

> [t]he episode of the morning was a matter of history, removed in time and space from the more recent scene […]. The mem-sahib was more important to his slavish

mind than the man who was touched, he being one of his many brown countrymen. To displease the mem-sahib was to him a crime for which no punishment was bad enough. (117)

Additionally, in view of their generalised dislike of European practices —such as beef eating and drinking— Christian missionaries started tolerating several Hindu practices as concessions to the converts, and in order to present Christianity as "free from Western customs" (Ambedkar, 2017: 142).[109] Thus, in order to spread Christianity among Indians, missionaries attempted to make it 'easy'. But precisely due to this policy of 'making Christianity accessible' casteism easily permeated Christianity.[110] Sujatha Gilda explains that, when the missionaries arrived at their village, they opened schools that, to the horror of Hindus, "welcomed even the untouchables. [But] the missionaries tried to accommodate these local customs. Sometimes they would make the untouchable students sit on the floor, reserving the benches for caste students, as they did in my school" (Gilda, 2017: 17).

Instead of being taught at school, Bama had to make sure that lower-caste children were in charge of "sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories" (Bama, 2014: 25). As she poignantly adds, "everything they [the nuns] said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them, suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change" (103). In fact, she complains that the Church twists the message and spirit of the Bible and teaches the oppressed children to shut their eyes when they pray "with deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall" (108). Her analysis proves that Christianity in India was keen to perpetuate Dalits' subalternity and ensure their social abjection.

[109] Among these concessions were the retention of the sacred thread and the mark on the forehead, the marrying of children before attaining puberty, the refusal of sacraments to females at certain times such as bathing as ceremonial purification, and the refusal of inter-marrying and inter-dining between castes (Ambedkar, 2017: 141).

[110] An example of the tolerant attitude of the Christian church towards caste practices was the 1923 letter of Pope Gregory XV. As Prakash Louis cites, "the letter allowed the request of the missionaries to adjust to certain caste practices, considering the 'difficulties' faced by the upper caste converts" (Louis, 2007: 18).

Consequently, Dalits remained 'untouchables' to the general Hindu mass, despite conversion. As Ambedkar argued, Christian preaching to the low castes was less centred on 'practical' reforms and more focused on the development of Christian social attitudes, which rendered it an empty doctrine. Ambedkar accused missionaries of being inactive regarding Dalits' social emancipation, and the Christian Dalit mental make-up of lacking a real urge to break the bonds.[111] The result is that Christianity has become a shamefully silent addendum to the old faith, rather than a substitute (Ambedkar, 2017: 153). As the historian Stanley Wolpert contends, "the spirit of Adam Smith's laissez-faire […] marched hand-in-hand with the gospel of evangelicalism through the narrow portals of company privilege" (Wolpert, 1989: 207-08).

In *Homo Hierarchicus* (1988), Louis Dumont argues that one is led to consider the caste system as an Indian institution having "its full coherence and vitality in the Hindu environment" (Dumont, 1988: 210). Yet, caste continues to exist, in more or less attenuated forms, in groups adhering to other religions since "a non-Hindu group cannot be regarded as independent of the environment in which it is set, as really constituting a society by itself, however strongly its own values push it in this direction" (210). There is, thus, general agreement that the caste component persisted in Christianity as a 'residual leftover' due to the influence of the Hindu environment. This 'policy of adaptation' sanctioned caste distinctions and did not alter the existing structures sufficiently enough; in fact, it worsened them, as anti-conversion movements intensified atrocities against Dalit Christians.[112] Furthermore, although Dalit Christians face similar forms of discrimination to other Dalits, legal safeguards against untouchability and casteist discrimination and the compensatory measures attached to them were not extended to Christian Dalits because of their exclusion from the official category of Scheduled Castes.[113]

[111] Ambedkar believed that the problem of the Christian faith is that it teaches 'the fall of man' as a result of his original sin and it presents the Christian religion as the one that promises the forgiveness of sins. From a sociological point of view, he considers that it is a doctrine fraught with disaster: instead of holding that the fall of man is due to an unpropitious and wrong social and religious environment, he is told that his fall is due to his sins. Thus, he ends up believing that there is no use in struggling (Ambedkar, 2017: 153).

[112] Atrocities such as physical abuse, burning of churches and arrests on false charges have heavily multiplied in the last decades (Webster, 1992).

[113] The existing legal protections against discrimination and atrocities for SCs under Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1976, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act Rules of 1995 do not apply to Dalit Christians. These Acts provide protection against various forms of violence and discriminations, such as depriving of facilities, denial of rights, eviction, economic exploitation including wrongful occupation of land and other properties, personal attack and exploitation including insulting, intimidating harassment and dishonouring, and criminal activities including rape, molestation, murder

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy explains that, when the British came to the village, "a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity […] to escape the scourge of Untouchability" (Roy, 1997: 74). They soon realised, however, that "they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop" (74). Later on, they found out that they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans "at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all" (74; emphasis in the original).

Conversion also affected converts psychologically as they often carried a dual identity. After conversion, Dalits kept on engaging with their local environments and networks in the same manner as before, and continued to be part of the same social and power structures. Tanika Sarkar refers to this phenomenon as an accumulation of identities among converts, which include "a series of deposits of cultural traces, rather than an exclusive gesture that rejects and abandons one identity for another" (Sarkar, 2002: 123). Jasbir Jain claims that conversion resulted in automatic disinheritance, and it did not offer a permanent bridge between two cultures (Jain, 2018: 105). This idea hints at Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), wherein he argues that the hybridisation of language and rituals is part of the missionary effort to bridge the gap between native resistance and colonial authority: "You vary our language and tell [the natives that] there must be a second birth" (Bhabha, 1994: 101), which is in tune with the Hindu principle of karma and rebirth. Moreover, the 'ambivalence of authority' that is developed in certain contexts, such as the Indian one, complicates easy practices of difference and mimetic sameness. According to him, the existence of two "contradictory knowledges, or [multiple beliefs], split the ego into two psychical attitudes, and forms of knowledge, towards the external world" (115). Taking a cue from this, conversion has never been free of conflict, division or anguish, both at an individual and collective level. If, on the one hand, it prompted the dream of equality, on the other, it held the threat of dislocation and the severance of ties

and massacre. But since religion is the primary criterion to officially define SCs in India, it completely ignores the reproduction of caste relations in Christianity (Webster, 1992).

with the community; more significantly, it ended up leaving the Dalit with an identity crisis deriving from this dual existence or in-betweenness.

Disillusioned and unemployed, but with a new sense of self, Bama leaves the religious order and returns to the Pariah community, where life is still insecure but she does not feel compromised. In the end, Bama rejects the blind faith instilled in her through fear and habit. "It seemed to me it was meaningless" (Bama, 2014: 105), she declares, "to repeat prayers in beautiful and decorative language, and to live without that correspondence and connection between prayer, worship and life" (105). The more she comes to understand the subtle, silent moves that continue to ignore her and her community, the more disappointed she feels. Her suffering is symptomatic of her community's alienation from mainstream society, and her identity as a Dalit Christian adds a further layer to her social oppression. She concludes that her fellow Dalits "should never believe one thing and do another. We should speak up about what we believe […]. That is being true to oneself. Everything else is play-acting" (105-06).

This proves that conversion failed to bring about an all-encompassing and fundamental change to Dalits. It not only failed to uproot and dissolve the casteist feeling among converts and the rest of the Hindu society, but casteism actually managed to infiltrate Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism as well. Contravening the egalitarian tenets of these faiths, their followers maintain varying levels of casteist discrimination against low-caste and outcaste converts and, therefore, Dalits continued to suffer under the yoke of ignominy harnessed by casteist society; they are still to be treated as 'untouchables', and their old identities and the discriminations against them are perpetuated in civil societal structures. As Jasbir Jain assures, "Prejudices die hard" (2018: 115).

The Rhetoric of Suffering

Dalit dispossession has been addressed through a range of remedial measures: religious conversion, emancipation through political alterity, and state protection of minority rights. But given the variety of aspects that shape Dalits' condition into a web of closely intertwined sources of oppression and humiliation, ridding oneself of one aspect will not necessarily put an end to the condition as such.

Judith Butler deploys the concept of 'cultural intelligibility' to refer to the production of a normative framework that conditions the legitimacy of a subject (Butler, 1993). She argues that subjects are performatively constituted through the repetition of specific norms within a tightly controlled regulatory framework. It is this normative framework that provides the conditions of recognition, legitimacy and culturally intelligibility of individuals although, at the same time, justifies the exclusion of those that cannot be accommodated within it. Butler calls this an 'exclusionary matrix' that renders subjects as abject (1993). The human being is, thus, normatively produced within particular cultural frames, and the 'cultural intelligibility' that Butler refers to confers value to specific existences. Gramsci used the term 'cultural hegemony' to describe and analyse the process through which social classes come to dominate, not only through physical power but through cultural domination (Gramsci, 1971). The Indian social space has undoubtedly experienced the confluence of physical and cultural hegemony, depriving many subjects of social validity, as is the case of the Dalit community.

Corporeal and Psychological Distress

In India, 'touchability' and 'untouchability' have become central social markers which bring into focus the phenomenology of the body in the domination-subordination question. Pramod Nayar states that bodies reflect ethical and subjective positions, but also economic identities. Regarding the particularity of the Indian context, he adds that,

> [w]ealthy bodies control poor bodies in a binary structure of ordering and obeying, involving power and fear. This image of differential corporeal conditions within the same topoi, based upon a person's class and caste, gestures at India's immoral economy through the trope of the 'untouchable' or 'slaving' body. (Nayar, 2013: 294)

Given the corporeal aspect of atrocity and social oppression, there is no doubt that the Dalit body becomes the main site of their suffering; that is, the wounds on Dalit bodies are instantiations of the violence of religion, culture, economy and law. Sharankumar Limbale has argued that Dalit writing is born out of actual material suffering, and that the articulation of pain and discomfort in these writings must be recognised as artistic values (Limbale, 2004:

108). The pain and agony which afflicted Dalits' bodies did not have a superficial impact; it inevitably permeated their inner selves. One of the most recurrent points in Dalit literature is, precisely, the mental anguish and emotional terror that result from experiencing or witnessing physical suffering. Somatic trauma, in their case, moved from physical to internal scarring, thus developing psychological boundaries to reinforce the already existing physical ones. As Roger Luckhurst suggests, suffering "leaks between mental and physical symptoms, […] via the mysterious processes of transference" (2008: 3).

Omprakash Valmiki depicts this permeability by narrating the effects attached to the physical abuse he endured at school: "I had begun to shake uncontrollably. The headmaster had pounced on my neck. […] As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of class and threw me on the ground" (Valmiki, 2003: 5). He confesses that he was "Mortally afraid of corporeal punishment", and lived in a state of "permanent nervous tension" (64). In *Karukku*, Bama begins her Preface with a description that analogises her caste-based suffering in corporeal terms:

> Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku [a kind of leaf with spikes] in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them [...]. The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed. (Bama, 2014: xxiii)

Each day, writes Bama, "brings new wounds" (105) for the Dalits. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble describes the posture a Dalit is forced to adopt in front of an upper caste so as to demonstrate obedience and servility: "He had to stand with his back bent all the way and greet anybody […]. He had to bend down, till his head touched his knee" (Kamble, 2008: 78). The loss of bodily dignity and bodily coherence in these images suggests the manipulation of bodies through socially-constructed conditions of terror. The whole casteist structure has rested on a balance between the conviction of the privileged that they have the right to be oppressive and the acquiescence of the non-privileged in the belief that they are fated to be oppressed.

The psychological consequences of this multi-layered and continuous oppression have accumulated multiple degrees and affected people in various ways, but no one remains unscathed. The solid religious tenets upheld throughout centuries, the upper castes' mindset

and demeanour, and the gradual depletion of their power and resources, has led Dalits to assimilate, accommodate to, and internalise the caste system (Tajfel, 1981).[114] Dalits are taught from a young age that their plight is the result of some immoral behaviour committed in a former life. Their station in society is their destiny, and to think of breaking out would be a violation of the rule of karma. Furthermore, any such break would result in even further suffering in the next life. To be faithful to the state into which one is born, and to adhere to its laws and moral precepts are the only means to emancipate oneself. Narendra Jadhav shows Dalits' indoctrination in the theory of karma:

> But I [Sonu] had reasoned out everything based on what I had always heard: the way things are is how God has ordained them; if we are being ill-treated, it is because of bad deeds in our past lifetime. I had told myself, if this is our destiny, we have to accept it and live with it, seeking solace in worshipping our gods […]. Only they could save us from calamities. (Jadhav, 2005: 214-15)

Philosopher Charles Taylor upholds that a person or a community can suffer real damage and distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning picture of themselves (Taylor, 1994). Both non-recognition and misrecognition can inflict harm and can become a form of oppression by imprisoning someone in a false, distorted or reduced mode of self. Dalits' identity was not chosen by them, but imposed and enforced in order to conform to prescriptive caste structures. Most of them come to accept their fate, and eventually develop a perception of a low and polluting self. This leads to a consciousness of 'difference' and inferiority that produces ontological guilt and shame.

Nancy Goldberger notes that silence —perceived as the fear to answer back and retaliate— is often used as a means of self-preservation and survival (Goldberger, 1996). Joan Mencher argues that those at the bottom of the Indian caste system have assimilated the idea that they are in need of less and, therefore, have less need to rationalise their inequities (Mencher, 1983). In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu ascribes the acceptance of one's position in society to the adaptation into a specific cultural habitus. He understands 'habitus' as the merging of a range

[114] The social psychologist Henry Tajfel defined 'assimilation' as the rejection of a minority's metaphysics in favour of that of the majority, which often leads to the masking of one's true social identity. 'Accommodation' encapsulates for him a group's attempts to compete on its own terms to gain material and other resources that are valued by the majority, while retaining their ethnic identity. Lastly, he interpreted 'internalization' as the acceptance of a minority status especially when groups see no alternatives to an existing system (Tajfel, 1981).

of collective groupings that concurrently interrelate with the ability to sustain discrete peculiarities. The cultural knowledge acquired from involvement in these collective groupings form the cultural habitus which, in turn, shapes behaviour, sensing, and the experience of survival (Bourdieu qtd. in Pizanais, 1996: 651). The fact that a person is acclimated into a specific cultural habitus from birth induces that person to normalise the rules and norms of that habitus. When this naturalisation occurs, it makes it difficult for individuals to challenge it.

Sujatha Gilda displays this assimilation stating: “I accepted this. No questions asked. […] That was the natural way of things” (Gilda, 2017: 5-6). Although this is a generalised phenomenon, assimilation was even more accentuated in older Dalits: “It’s not work meant for you. It’s for unlettered folks like us. It’s for those who are already broken in mind, body, nose, forehead, broken everywhere, broken and dead” (Bagul, 2018: 99). To this, Bagul asks: “what kind of evil nation was this that any man should ask another to do such hateful work for money? And what kind of people would accept that it was their lot in life to do such work?” (101).

This assimilation of oppression has led to a process of accommodation. Charlotte Wolf explains that some people get accustomed to and accept the oppressive social patterns as normal and inevitable with the passing of time, which she defines as ‘habituation’. Others learn to accept and fit into a particular social order because they are forced to, something that Wolf calls ‘accommodation’ and that, according to her, is facilitated by the processes of relative advantage, group conservatism, and dependency. Thus, with relative advantage, a group legitimates the existing status quo by favourably comparing itself with groups in lower strata. Following Wolf’s observations, it can be inferred that victims of oppression can, eventually, participate in their own derogation (Wolf, 1986).

Satyanarayana shows this legitimation in the Dalits’ mindset as “No one in the village came out in his support since even his clansmen were of the opinion that being an untouchable, he was not supposed to hold land” (Satyanarayana, 2011: 15). In Narendra Jadhav’s text, Damu’s mother argues that “A true Mahar would die before shirking his responsibility” when her son refuses to carry out his Yeskar duty (Jadhav, 2005: 32). In Bagul’s “Revolt”, in view that Jaichand refuses to abandon his studies so as to work as a sweeper, “In his head, [his father] was trying to find the words to dispel the white-collar dreams his son had been nurturing” (Bagul, 2018: 90). Roy will, in turn, affirm that “human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to” (Roy, 1997: 50).

This idea that complicity between dominant and subordinated groups helps to maintain the system of dominance is not new in the study of caste (Moffatt, 1979). The lower castes share with the higher castes the basic casteist assumptions and values and "recreate among themselves virtually every relation and institution from which they have been excluded for the reason of their untouchability" (89). In other words, a continuous conformity to playing the imposed roles render Dalits both the victims and the agents of the caste system.

Casteist reality has become integrated into the Indian psyche, including Dalits' subjective world. As Wolf (1986) argues, subalterns eventually come to see themselves as inferior and powerless. Fanon states that an ongoing psychological oppression leads to psychic alienation and a process of internalisation (Fanon, 1986). The impact of oppression, such as cultural depreciation and the removal of core cultural identities, may have produced in Dalits feelings of self-hatred, internalisation of negative identities, and low self-esteem. They have been systematically deleted from any cultural or social standing; their values, needs and access to development have been denied by a system that has stood firmly in place for centuries. Deleted as though they do not exist —except to perform degrading and debasing services that confirm their lowly place in the scheme of things— there is no hope for them.

They have come to believe in their 'untouchable' status to such an extent that they hold themselves back. This pessimism, fostered by repeated instances of failure, cyclically promotes an assimilated kind of impotence. Martin Seligman defines this as 'learned helplessness', or the state of passivity developed in response to repeated experiences of failure, and he underlines its capacity to solidify apathy towards adverse living circumstances (Seligman, 1975). Sociologist Robert Deliège, for his part, states:

> [t]hrough their myth, the untouchables contest their position in the caste system, [but] they do not question the system itself, which they present as a matter of fact; through their myths, untouchables clearly legitimate the inferior position of those who deal with impure matters […]. (Deliège, 1993: 539)

This is evident in Jadhav's text as he begins by mentioning a fable about Ekalavya —a tribal boy and an outcaste— included in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. For Jadhav, the moral of this fable is that power will simply remain the guarded possession of the high-born, who will always

strive to ensure that an outcaste remains low. He argues, "Paralyzed by the system, the outcaste will never dare to question it" (Jadhav, 2005: 2).

The deleterious psychological effects of casteist oppression and its concomitant reinforcement in the scriptures and epics often lead Dalits to surrender their power. In *Karukku*, Bama recounts an incident witnessed by her as a young child wherein her grandmother, Paatti, was humiliated by a Naicker (upper caste) lady in whose house she worked. After a hard day's toil comprising filthy chores, Paatti placed the vessel she had brought with her near the drain. The Naicker lady, then, held her vessel filled with leftover food at a good distance and poured it into Paatti's vessel, taking care all the time not to let her vessel touch Paatti's —lest it got polluted. When Bama tells Paatti that she should not expose herself to this kind of humiliation, Paatti responds: "These people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven't we been lower-caste? Can we change this?" (Bama, 2014: 17).

Albert Camus comments that the spirit of revolt can only exist in a society in which theoretical equality conceals great factual inequalities (Camus, 1956). The fact that the age-old caste system is rooted in Dalits' psyche is what keeps their rebellion in check. The soul crunching humiliation that Bakha feels when he is slapped in the middle of the road by a high-caste Hindu for unwittingly touching him, the inhumanity of the people who perversely enjoy his humiliation, Pundit Kali Nath's attempt to molest his sister Sohini, the verbal abuse showered at him for defiling a high-caste woman's door, the way food is literally flung at him as if he were a dog, the curses heaped on him for trying to save a high-caste boy, and the derogatory words with which he is addressed to by Mary Hutchinson, all prove the explicit hostility that haunts him all the way throughout his journey (Anand, 2014). Given the cruelty and discrimination which Dalits such as Bakha were used to, every speck of humanity was received with the utmost gratitude: "There was a comfortable, homely glow radiating from the smile that the Havildar wore. Bakha felt happy in his presence. 'For this man', he said to himself, 'I wouldn't mind being a sweeper all my life" (91). Anand stresses this feeling again:

> [h]is whole body and mind were tense with admiration and gratitude to his benefactor. '[…] Such kindness from the Havildar, who is a Hindu.' […] He couldn't look at so generous a person. […] He was grateful, grateful, haltingly grateful, falteringly grateful, stumblingly grateful, so grateful that he didn't know

> how he could walk the ten yards to the corner to be out of the sight of his benevolent and generous host. (94-5)

In older Dalits, this congenital humility and servility is further intensified: "'You didn't abuse or hit back, did you?'" his father asked (68). Lackha's sense of fear "for the consequences of such a crime, should he have been provoked to commit it, was mixed with that servile humility of his which could never entertain the prospect of retaliation against the high-caste men" (68). Lakha educates his son explaining: "'They are really kind. We must realize that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.' He had never throughout his narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate" (70).

Kamble also pinpoints the learned helplessness in her community, reproaching the caste Hindus for it: "you must admit that we have been the most devoted children […]. We never rebelled against you, did we? […] We obeyed every diktat of your Hindu religion […]. We never dared to cross your path" (Kamble, 2008: 37-8). Bama also asserts that Dalits "have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and selfworth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart" (Bama, 2014: 28). This phenomenon dovetails with Louis Dumont's (1988) idea of continuous hierarchy, according to which the victims of the purity-pollution ideology also participate in its perpetuation by sustaining asymmetric relationships and institutionalising the master-slave relationship (Hegel, 1977).

Ambedkar denounces the fact that the lower castes have been completely disabled for direct action: "They were condemned to be lowly; and not knowing the way of escape, and not having the means of escape, they became reconciled to eternal servitude, which they accepted as their inescapable fate" (Ambedkar, 1989: 275). What Ambedkar infers is the development of a slave mentality, very much related to the biological idea of inferiority developed by Abbe Dubois:

> The idea that the [Dalit] was born to be in subjection to the other castes is so ingrained in his mind that it never occurs to the Pariah to think that his fate is anything but irrevocable. Nothing will ever persuade him that men are all made of the same clay, or that he has the right to insist on better treatment than that which is meted out to him. (Dubois, 1906: 29)

This internalisation of one's biological inferiority is illustrated by Kamble in the Mahar women, who have completely internalised the power structures that subjugate them; their understanding of their social situation is thus pre-determined: "Take care little master! Please keep a distance don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted" (Kamble, 2008: 14). Moreover, the benevolence bestowed on Dalits by their 'masters' was preferred to their tyrannies; to serve the upper castes was seen as a natural trait of low castes, and upper-caste 'kindness' was in turn expected to arouse humility, submission and *seva* (spirit of service) among Dalits.

The link between the Dalits as embodying pollution, and their pollution as entailing multi-layered oppression, seems to follow a circular logic. This 'inescapability' from the trauma of the stigmatised social body not only creates a sensation of hopelessness, but also disables Dalits from positioning themselves regarding their past and present situation, and from realising the changes undergone. "When I Hid My Caste" narrates the predicament of Mumbaikar, a Dalit man who is forced to conceal his caste so as to be allowed to get a job in the city other than the one meant for his caste. He poignantly states:

> [i]n this luck-forsaken country, human beings should not be born as Dalits. If and when they are, they must bear such sorrow and such disrespect as would make death seem an easier option, making a cup of poison a Dalit's best friend. (Bagul, 2018: 116)

And he goes on to explain: "This is the extent of the mental and emotional atrocities that I had to bear. If I had continued to live there, continued to hide my caste, the anxiety would have driven me mad" (116). Narendra Jadhav also depicts their mental weariness by pondering: "I wondered who we were to make plans when life willed otherwise" (Jadhav, 2005: 29).

Taking a cue from Tabish Khair's understanding of the concept of 'alienation' as not merely reduced to spatial displacement, but actually discursive inner conflict (Khair, 2001: 69), parallels can be drawn with the Dalits' case. The caste system has pressed this community towards separation, both physically and mentally. They have been driven to a mental state of exile wherein they feel dejected and isolated from the world that surrounds them. Franz Fanon concludes that oppressive social systems lead to de-culturisation and cultural estrangement (1986). Another indelible mark left on the Dalits' psyche is, thus, their disrupted sense of

reality. This psychological disturbance is reflected in the figure of Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, who has internalised his inferiority to such an extent that he considers the upper castes as benefactors rather than perpetrators. Roy describes him as "An old Paravan, who had seen the Walking Backwards days, torn between Loyalty and Love" (Roy, 1997: 255). His loyalty towards the upper castes is such that, upon discovering his son's transgression, he "started by recounting to Mammachi how much her family had done for his. Generation for generation" (255). Right after that, he refers to his transgressive son as a 'monster' whom he would be willing to kill so as "To destroy what he had created" (78).

Trauma

It is undeniable that this oppressive caste system —religiously, economically, politically and socially sanctioned— has inflicted on the Dalit community an entire traumatic existence. Yet, before applying the concept of 'trauma' to their case, the specificities of this context and the conditions at issue must be considered.

The phenomenon of 'trauma' was officially acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the 1980s under the title 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD),[115] which included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and

[115] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000), the first recorded mention to 'trauma' (which comes from the Greek word for 'wound') in English occurred in 1693, when the second edition of *Blanchard's Physical Dictionary* defined it as "a wound from an external cause". Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, trauma was understood as a physical injury, and it was not until the late 19th century —when the enormous transformations of industrial modernity exposed people to new and hitherto unimagined dangers— that the notion of 'psychological trauma' began to take root. This is why critics have often connected the origins of the trauma paradigm to the onset of Western modernity. As Roger Luckhurst contends, "trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, […] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technical and statistical society that can generate, multiply and quantify the 'shocks' of modern life" (Luckhurst, 2008: 19). The emergence of the trauma paradigm was thus "simultaneously responsive to and constitutive of modernity" (Micale & Lerner, 2001: 22). In January 1978, 'catastrophic stress disorder' —ultimately re-termed 'post-traumatic stress disorder'— was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III-R) in the section on anxiety disorders (Young, 1995: 109-11). DSM-III was finally published in 1980. Its first version established that PTSD includes a reaction to a catalysing event that is "outside the range of usual human experience", and a re-experience of the event in a number of different ways —recurrent, intrusive, and distressful recollections of the event; dreams of the event; sudden acting or feeling association with an environmental or ideational stimulus; a numbing of response to the external world along with other observable symptoms, including hyperalertness, sleep disturbance, guilt about surviving, memory impairment, and avoidance of activities that arouse the recollection of the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 1980: 236-38).

natural catastrophes (Caruth, 1995a). Cathy Caruth argues that the diagnosis of PTSD must be tied to specific kinds of events, and she defines trauma as

> [a] response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which take the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (4-5)[116]

She clarifies that it is not the event itself that defines trauma —which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatise everyone equally— nor the distortion of the event, but rather its reception; most specifically, the belated integration of the event or the failure to integrate it altogether in one's psyche. She underlines that the delay or incompletion in grasping the overwhelming occurrence is not a simple amnesia but, paradoxically enough, it is the very overwhelming immediacy of the event that produces the belated uncertainty (6). This lack of registration or normal encoding in memory, which defies simple comprehension, is what Dori Laub defines as 'collapse of witnessing'. He explains the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs as "being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist" (Laub, 1995: 66).

Apart from the belatedness of an overwhelming event, Caruth also highlights the possession of the victim by the event, the insistent 'reenactments' which not only serve as testimony, but may also bear witness to the force of an experience that was never fully registered as it occurred (151). Regarding these involuntary reenactments, Roger Luckhurst argues that traumatic memories are repressed as they are formed, which leaves them unavailable to conscious recall. Subsequently, they recur in various displaced ways, such as hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares. When the traumatic experience returns, unbidden, to consciousness, the sudden collision of past and present "violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete" (Luckhurst, 2008: 3).

[116] Cathy Caruth based her theories of trauma on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2010a) and the definition of PTSD given in the DSM-III of the American Psychiatric Association.

As regards the traumatic aftereffects that represent the continuation of the traumatic process, several types of disturbances of affective and cognitive patterns could be highlighted. Anhedonia and alexithymia —or the diminution in the capacity for pleasure, joy and happiness (Krystal, 1971; 1978a; 1978b)[117]; anxiety, panic, numbing —or 'affective anaesthesia' (Minkowski, 1946); and hypervigilance and repetitive dreams are some of the most recurrent sequelae. The 'speechless terror' (van der Kolk, 1987) experienced during an overwhelming event can also lead to the fixation of those memories that resist reworking and re-categorisation and, therefore, cannot be organised on a linguistic level —what Pierre Janet has called *idée fixes* (1895; 1990). This failure to arrange memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organised on a somatosensory level: as somatic sensations, behavioural re-enactments, nightmares, and flashbacks (Brett & Ostroff, 1985). In tune with this, Caruth concluded that "It is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (Caruth, 1995a: 9).

Untouchability and the stigma it produces follow Dalits everywhere; no matter how far they have gone or what they have done, they still run the risk of being abused, discriminated against or pointed at because of their caste. This has undoubtedly led to a perpetual state of anxiety, fear, disrupted sense of oneself, dissociation and voicelessness, to name but a few effects. Kamble, for instance, depicts the diminishing impact that public spaces have on Dalits as their bodies undergo a painful compression which is only overcome when they step out of the upper castes' territory (Kamble, 2008). Bama explains the dread she and the rest of her community felt at hearing the police officers' footsteps walking around their streets and arresting Dalits by admitting that "Even the slightest noise sounded huge to us, made our insides quake" (Bama, 2014: 37). The same feeling is expressed by Valmiki:

> Every second I worried that the headmaster was coming… […]. At the slightest sound my heart pounded. […] my heart trembled the moment I saw Headmaster Kaliram. It seemed as though it wasn't a teacher who was coming towards me but a snorting wild boar with his snout up in the air. (Valmiki, 2003: 90)

[117] Caruth defines 'alexithymia' as an overly exaggerated emphasis upon the mundane details of the 'things' in one's life and a severe impairment in the capacity for wish-fulfilment fantasy (Caruth, 1995a: 78).

In *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, while in a teashop in the city, Damu "sat on the edge of the chair, afraid they would throw [him] out" (Jadhav, 2005: 114). He reacted that way because, in his village, he "could not have entered a teashop without being identified as a Mahar, and would surely have been driven out instantly" (114). Later one, at a high-caste man's house, he once again stood shyly on the floor in a corner, as was 'customary' in his village, even though he was invited to sit down: "The saheb was surprised, and he gave me a hand to stand up and made me sit on the couch next to him. I was very uncomfortable" he says, and confesses to have felt "totally out of place. My lowly place was so deeply etched in my mind that when I was treated well, I could not believe it. I thought there was something wrong" (117).

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Meena Kandasamy narrates the denouement of the conflict between Dalit agricultural labourers and their ruthless upper-caste landlords in Kilvenmani, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Mobilised by the Communist Party leaders to demand a higher share of the paddy fields' yield, the Dalit agricultural labourers decide to go on strike. On the night of 25 December 1968, the landlords send in rowdies to attack the rebellious labourers. Although most male villagers manage to run away and save their lives, most women, children, and old people remain in the village. They all try to hide in a hut, but the attackers lock them up from the outside and set fire to the hut, burning forty-four people. Weeks later, most perpetrators are declared innocent and all evidence of the crime is destroyed, while the victims of the massacre are charged with murder and armed rebellion and taken to jail. Traumatised, the victims "burned all over again" (Kandasamy, 2014: 220), till they were completely "forgotten. That was all. This was it" (217), a statement that points to the compulsion to re-enact the tragic event in the victims' minds.

Furthermore, the fact that victims find it difficult to give a coherent and uniform statement of their trauma before the court and the commission leads the official institutions to discard their testimonies for lack of consistency (248), to which Kandasamy's novel retorts:

> Perhaps he wanted a single story: uniform, end to end to end. The 'Once upon a time, there lived an old lady in a tiny village' story. Sadly, we are not able to tell such a story. A story told in many voices is seen as unreliable. […] We were bound to lose. Because we do not know how to tell our story. Because we do not rehearse.

> Because some of us are tongue-tied. Because all of us are afraid and the fear in our hearts slurs the truth in our voice. (234-35)

As Caruth has explained, it is the very unassimilated nature of trauma, the fact that the event was not acknowledged or experienced fully at the time, that later on returns to haunt the survivor (Caruth, 1995a: 4-10). Most of these trauma victims suffer from a blockage that prevents them from reacting against, even acknowledging, what has actually happened to them; but are nonetheless haunted by those memories. This is clearly embodied by Arumugam's daughter:

> She is caught between his fear and her lack of any idea of what happened. The terror talks to her body in strange ways. She shivers when she is alone. She has seizures in her sleep. She needs to be held by someone. […] She keeps asking about the others, her friends. She calls them, one by one. They are dead, but to her it doesn't matter. Perhaps they come and stand in a line. […] Perhaps they dance too, one leg in the air, half-bent, and then the other. Perhaps they can only stay still. (Kandasamy, 2014: 201)

Anand, for his part, argues that "in the lives of this riff-raff, this scum of the earth, these dregs of humanity, only silence, grim silence, the silence of death fighting for life, prevailed" (Anand, 2014: 27-8), which points to the speechless effect mentioned by van der Kolk. In Bagul, the silence and numbing pointed out by Caruth is evident in the Dalit Mumbaikar, who had been forced to hide his caste. When he gets caught in his lie, he remains paralysed by dread: "through it all, not a word came from my mouth, not a tear fell from my eyes. I fell where the blows took me. I took the punches as they came. I let the blood flow" (Bagul, 2018: 134). Sujatha Gilda also describes the level of psychological impact that upper castes had on Dalits:

> Professor Tripathi merely stared at her coldly and said nothing. Humiliated, Manjula excused herself. She left the office feeling dizzy. As she walked to the library, she could feel the venom of this poisonous man spread through her veins, shutting down her heart, her brain. She was on the point of collapsing. (Gilda, 2017: 192)

The overlapping of the main narrative with recurrent flashbacks echoes in *The God of Small Things* the characters' mental process of trying to retrieve memories, which testifies to the resurfacing of suppressed traumatic events —although 'trauma' *per se* is only mentioned once in the text: "[the police inspector] noted the dilated pupils. He had seen it all before… the human mind's escape valve. Its way of managing trauma" (Roy, 1997: 313).

Lucy Bond and Stef Craps agree with Caruth that there is no special kind of event that should incite a traumatised reaction, which is why instead of speaking of traumatic events they propound the term 'traumatic effects'. They contend that what counts as trauma in one context may not be recognised as such in another. Thus, trauma is a culturally and historically contingent phenomenon (Bond & Craps, 2017: 14).

Nevertheless, Bond and Craps also signal significant blind spots in Caruth's —and APA's— categorisation of PTSD, accusing it of ignoring theoretical diversity. They consider the definition of PTSD as disciplinarily biased and unmindful of psychodynamic perspectives; most importantly, they argue that its specific list of diagnostic criteria unduly restricts the kinds of experiences that can be recognised as traumatic, thus legitimising the suffering of certain subject groups above others. This produces an implicitly Western-centric model of trauma that marginalises the suffering of peripheral individuals and communities (37-8). If Caruth's paradigm were to be strictly applied to the Dalit context, it would be observed that, while some of the symptoms are indeed present in some cases, not all Dalits experience the traumatic pathologies as proposed by Caruth.

The Questioning of Western Trauma Theories/ Multidirectional Suffering/ Insidious Trauma

Several scholars have aimed at working on early trauma theories' limitations. As Stef Craps shows in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013), the founding texts of cultural trauma theory have tended to ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority groups. Despite the omnipresence of violence and suffering, most attention has been focused on events that took place in Europe or the United States, as the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra demonstrate. A broadening of focus in the field is thus called for, to go hand in hand with a revision of the supposed universal validity of Western definitions of trauma and recovery (Craps, 2013).

Bond and Craps argue that the PTSD construct is insufficiently attuned to, and even obscures, issues of racism, heterosexism, classism and other forms of ongoing structural oppression as sources of trauma. They particularly underline its exclusive focus on sudden, unexpected, catastrophic events as problematic since it ignores the chronic psychic suffering caused by structural violence: "The cumulative impact of the often subtle everyday discriminations and humiliations inflicted on the victims of such forms of oppression can be as profound as that of spectacular and instantaneous acts of violence" (Bond & Craps, 2017: 108-09).

The feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown disagrees with APA's definition of trauma and argues that "These experiences are not unusual […], they are well within the "range of human experience" (Brown, 1991: 121). She claims that they are experiences to which victims accommodate, "potentials for which [they] make room in their lives and psyches" (121). Human experience, as referred to in diagnostic manuals, often means male human experience; consequently, the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. "Trauma is, thus, that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other" (121). Behind this may lie the purpose of creating a social discourse on 'normal' life.

Bond and Craps point to another limitation of the event-based model, attributable to its rootedness in Western conceptions of personhood: the tendency to regard trauma as an individual phenomenon. They argue that this would not only complicate approaches to collectivist societies, but would also dodge supra-individual conditions that enable the traumatic abuse, such as political oppression, social exclusion, and economic deprivation (Bond & Craps, 2017: 108-09). The discrepancy between a Western framework of trauma and the prolonged pain suffered by oppressed groups makes its application inadequate. Universalising this Western concept of PTSD in an uncritical manner risks rendering the specificity of this suffering invisible and unknowable, while constituting a form of cultural imperialism or neo-colonialism (Summerfield, 1996). In other words, decolonising trauma studies is not just about expanding the scope, but also about critically examining and revising dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery.

A related strand of criticism, spearheaded by Michael Rothberg's influential work on 'multidirectional memory' (2009), has called for a comparative approach to memory that

explores historical violence through a crosscultural framework. Rothberg offers an alternative to the 'competitive memory' model, according to which the capacity to remember historical tragedies is limited, and any attention to one tragedy inevitably diminishes our capacity to remember another. He suggests that we should consider memory as multidirectional, that is, "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (Rothberg, 2009: 3). An alternative conceptualisation proposed to capture the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma is 'complex PTSD', or disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified (Herman, 1992a).[118] As Herman comments, "post-traumatic stress disorder fails to capture either the protean symptomatic manifestations of prolonged, repeated trauma or the profound deformations of personality that occur" (119). By contrast, complex post-traumatic stress disorder understands responses to trauma as "a spectrum of conditions rather than as a single disorder", ranging "from a brief stress reaction that gets better by itself and never qualifies for a diagnosis, to classic or simple post-traumatic stress disorder, to the complex syndrome of prolonged, repeated trauma" (119).

All these scholars accuse the event-based paradigm of being too limited to account for the injustices and inequalities suffered by oppressed groups, whose situation of misrecognition and misinterpretation has been regularly overlooked and normalised. They argue that this reinforces Eurocentrism by undermining non-Western traumata, as if non-Western genocides and violence, like that inflicted by the Indian caste system, would not count.

As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner, 1996: 85). The past is alive in the present, and its legacies continue to resonate in complex and controversial ways, especially those connected to violent episodes. As Bond and Craps claim, "traumatic experiences leave deep scars that can remain unresolved for decades, generations, even centuries" (Bond & Craps, 2017: 12). What they aim for is the understanding of certain long-term consequences of institutionalised oppression that denigrate the self-worth of the socially othered.

APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* has recently incorporated a category called DESNOS (Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified), which

[118] Several other developed theories are type II traumas, safe-world violations (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), oppression-based trauma (Spanierman & Poteat, 2005) and postcolonial syndrome (Duran et al, 1998).

describes the more subtle and characterologically imprinted effects of long-term, chronic trauma, and allows for the recognition of a traumatic experience exhibited in more subtle kinds of behaviour (Caruth, 1995a: viii-ix). This category recognises that survivors of prolonged abuse may undergo somatic, dissociative and affective sequelae, such as personality changes and vulnerability to repeated harm. Moreover, through dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimisation and, sometimes, outright denial, victims of prolonged violence may learn to alter an unbearable reality by developing paralysis of initiative, apathy and helplessness (Herman, 1992a: 381). Isolation may also increase the victim's dependency on the perpetrator, not only for survival, but also for emotional sustenance. With this increased dependency upon the perpetrator comes a constriction in initiative and planning: the victim no longer thinks of how to escape, but rather of how to stay alive, or how to make the experience more bearable. This is known as 'traumatic bonding' (Walker, 1979; van der Kolk, 1987).

Subjection to a relationship of coercive control undoubtedly produces profound alterations in the victim's identity. All the structures of the self are invaded and systematically broken down. While the victim of a single acute trauma may say s/he is 'not herself/himself' since the event, the victim of chronic trauma may lose the sense that s/he has a self (Herman, 1992a: 385). The psychotherapist Maria Root has coined the term 'insidious trauma' (1989, 1992) in order to enhance the generic qualities of trauma in people on whom the cumulative degradation and effects of oppression are not always blatant or overtly violent, but nonetheless threaten their basic well-being. She affirms that post-traumatic symptoms have the power to filter through generations when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma; those for whom insidious trauma is 'a way of life'. She states that 'trauma' has to be understood as resulting from a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening; from a persisting condition as well as from an acute event; from a sustained exposure to battle as well as from a moment of numbing shock; from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single searing assault, from a period of severe attenuation and erosion as well as from a sudden flash of fear (Root, 1989, 1992).

Laura Brown also believes that post-traumatic symptoms can spread among oppressed social groups, especially when their members have been exposed to some kind of trauma for a lifetime, which testifies to the intergenerational nature of trauma (Brown, 1991). Lucy Bond and Stef Craps agree to trauma's potential to pass down through generations, as they argue that

children of survivors inherit memories of catastrophic events they did not themselves live through; they call this 'transgenerational legacies' (Bond & Craps, 2017: 85).[119]

Dalit trauma is hardly a straightforward case of punctual trauma. There is usually no particular traceable episode that breaches their usual life; they endure a continuous traumatic living filled with many overwhelming and violent events, something that Pramod Nayar referred to as a 'trauma-continuum' (Nayar, 2018: 332). Violence and discrimination, and the feeling of total impotence against a continuous process of de-historisation and disenfranchisement are experienced in what Lawrence Langer (1995) has called 'durational time' or never-ending and perpetually returning. Subsequent developments and changes hardly ever erase suffering, for trauma has an 'endless impact' on Dalits' lives. Due to this, most Dalit texts eschew specificity of time, chronology and place, a narrative device which confirms the alleged continuum of suffering (Nayar, 2012). 'Durational time' in Dalit literature is about transgenerational trauma in which an entire family, over generations, is subject to suffering, atrocity, and violence. As Bama bluntly puts it,

> In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks you […]. They seem to conspire to keep us in our place: to think that we who've worked throughout history like beasts, should live and die like that. (Bama, 2014: 26-8)

Jadhav also portrays the ubiquity of oppression in Dalits' lives and their subsequent distortion of reality. When circumstances separate Damu from a high-caste family for whom he had been working, he mourns the loss of people who did not abuse him, something that he classifies as "a strange world", utterly different from his everyday reality (Jadhav, 2005: 127). Casteist

[119] Recent research in epigenetics has suggested that trauma may travel across generations in an altogether more literal way. They argue that trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes which is, then, passed down to the following generation. Although this trace does not cause any direct genetic mutation, supporters of this theory argue that it can alter the mechanism whereby the gene is converted into functioning proteins or expressed (Carey, 2018). As Benedict Carey notes, "if these studies hold up, they would suggest that we inherit some trace of our parents' and grandparents' experience, particularly their suffering, which in turn modifies our own day-to-day health —and perhaps our children's, too" (2018). Nevertheless, the scientific community has reached no consensus about the viability of such claims.

oppression has impregnated Dalits' psyche up to such a point that "no one could make sense of the flame of revolt […]. There was no way for them to understand it. For their minds had been murdered long ago by Manu" (Bagul, 2018: 103).

The generational transmissibility of trauma that Root points out (1992: 241) is evident in many Dalit characters who, despite not having suffered the direct verbal and physical violence imposed on their parents or grandparents, nonetheless inherit their fear, alertness and submissiveness towards the high castes. Jadhav's memoir maps such transgenerational suffering. In the conclusion, he describes how he took his son to visit his former home in order to refresh his own memory of past sufferings, thus instilling affliction in his son (Jadhav, 2005: 258-59). After exploring in detail the religious rituals of her community in Maharashtra, Kamble concludes: "Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life" (Kamble, 2008: 37). This intergenerational nature of Dalits' trauma is emphasised again by affirming: "One generation perished but the next generation would be ready to serve […] the monsters" (104).

Trauma is, therefore, a normal experience for the Dalit community. *Ants Among Elephants* is a written social document of Dalit culture and memory, and an attempt to search for a collective identity. It is the chronicle of three generations that records the shared struggle of being born Dalits. In the Introduction, the author painfully writes: "My stories, my family's stories, were not stories in India. They were just life" (Gilda, 2017: 3). She later on adds: "When I left and made new friends in a new country, only then did the things that happened to my family, the things we had done, become stories. Stories worth telling, stories worth writing down" (5). Only when Dalits detach themselves from casteist reality do they become aware of the extraordinary nature of their situation. As she reflects, "When you are surrounded by so much misery, you don't see it as anything extraordinary" (295).

The longevity of this institutionalised oppression and the inescapability of one's wretched fate is explained by Anand as follows:

> Though [Bakha] had the receptivity of the man who is willing to lend his senses to experience, he had an unenlightened will. Heredity had furrowed no deep grooves in his soul […]. The cumulative influence of careful selection had imprisoned his free will in the shackles of slavery to the dreary routine of one occupational

> environment. He could not reach out from the narrow and limited personality he had inherited to his larger yearning. It was a discord between person and circumstance by which a lion like him lay enmeshed in a net while many a common criminal wore a rajah's crown. (Anand, 2014: 81)

Ambedkar pondered that "The civilisation of one generation, when inherited becomes the equipment of the next. This social heritage is absolutely essential for each generation. All progress will die out if this social heritage is destroyed" (Ambedkar, 2017: 10). However, a civilisation thus understood may be a hindrance rather than help: "It might have gone on a wrong track, it might have based itself on false values and false premises. Such a civilisation might easily cause stagnation of the Community and the stunting of the individual" (10). In the case of Dalits, social heritage is an utter burden as they carry a memory of deprivation and repression writ through generations. The nature of their bondage is cyclical and inescapable, as the same people who were exploited earlier will continue to be exploited. Despite all efforts undertaken by them to overcome their hardships, to survive and to succeed, their 'Dalitness' is something that does not leave them. In *Joothan*, Valmiki extends the events of the past into the present and the future and wonders, "Why is caste my only identity?" (Valmiki, 2003: 134). He realises that one cannot ever abandon one's caste and, consequently, trauma remains perennial. In the same way, Limbale affirms:

> Dalits may attain educational, economic, social and political success, but their unique Dalitness remains […]. The uniqueness of the Dalit experience […] rests in the fact that the core of Dalit materiality is untouchability, which results in the naming the Dalit as the unclean impure Other. (Limbale, 2004: 12)

Apart from the effects of exposure to prolonged suffering, Bond and Craps propose the concept of 'trauma of the future' or pre-traumatic stress (PreTss) reactions, such as intrusive images of and nightmares about negative future events, avoidance behaviour, and increased arousal to stimuli associated with traumatic events (Bond & Craps, 2017: 126). They argue that past-related PTSD symptoms are found to be mirrored by similar future-related PTSD symptoms. Following this, the prevailing understanding of PTSD as a disorder primarily related to the past needs to be revised. They claim that "intrusive images and dreams of future events and associated avoidance and increased arousal are experiences to the same extent as reexperiencing, avoidance, and increased arousal associated with past events" (126). In *Tense*

Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form (2015a), Paul Saint-Amour also calls for a re-orientation of trauma studies from the past to the future, from memory to anticipation. As he points out, the field lacks "an account of the traumatizing power of anticipation" (17); rather, the field tends to construct it as "a container for the repetition of past traumas" and not as "a vector or agent of traumatization" (17). In the same vein, Freud considers anxiety as a shield against traumatisation, instead of a source of it (Freud qtd. in Saint-Amour, 2015b).

Dalits show psychosomatic effects of trauma not only *a posteriori*, but they also experiment its effects in advance, before even being disturbed by an event. When Bakha is reminded by his father of the labour that awaits him for a lifetime, "Bakha felt the keen edge of his sense of anticipation draw before his eyes the horrible prospect of all the future days of service in the town and the insults that would come with them" (Anand, 2014: 65-6). The ghost of oppressive tradition, heritage, and the caste system haunted Bakha. This anticipation of trauma is once again experienced by him when he has to carry on his sweeping chores at the temple and, before stepping in, he feels paralysed by the burden of his 'untouchable' status: "He hadn't the courage to go. He felt weak. He realized that an untouchable going into a temple polluted it past purification" (48). In Sujatha Gilda's text, the young Dalit Satyam has internalised, not only his station, but also the effects it has on all spheres of life, and reflects:

> 'The first girl who asks me, I will marry here,' he told himself. Then a girl did, and he didn't. […] he didn't want to marry a caste girl. She might like him, but what if she looked down on his family, on their house, on their neighbourhood? (Gilda, 2017: 146)

The prolonged exposure to casteist violence made Dalits anticipate verbal and physical abuse. After being scolded and slapped in the face by the high-caste man for not announcing his presence and accidentally touching him —and being surrounded afterwards by a crowd of curious and equally abusive caste men— Bakha feels the initial impulse to run away from there. He soon realises, however, that pushing through the crowd would pollute many more people, "And he could already hear in his ears the abuse that he would thus draw on himself" (Anand, 2014: 39). Similarly, when his father reprimands him for forgetting to announce his presence, Bakha adamantly replies: "But, father, what is the use? They would ill-treat us even if we shouted" (67). In Jadhav's text, after the corpse Damu was guarding as part of his Yeskar duty was cremated, Damu kept on waiting to be allowed to return home after having spent all the

night out in the open with neither food nor water. While he waits for that command to be uttered, one of his cousins brings him a basket of *bhakris* sent by his wife. Although utterly hungry and thirsty, Damu refuses to take the *bhakris*; he knew that, if he did, he would be severely and mercilessly beaten by the policemen (Jadhav, 2005: 20).

All these instances demonstrate the power of casteist oppression to create an anticipated trauma and suffering on the Dalit community. As pointed out by Saint-Amour, it is time for trauma studies to take seriously the suggestion that the dread of a potentially oncoming disaster can traumatise as much as an actually realised one (Saint-Amour, 2015a: 23).

Cultural/ Founding Trauma

The individual suffering embodied in these narratives is tightly bound to the individual's social position, linking thus a Dalit's individual plight with the scars on the Dalit social body. Trauma, as Bond and Craps conclude, is slippery: it blurs the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence, and traverses the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective (Bond & Craps, 2017: 5).

Although Bond and Craps warn that collective consciousness does not function in the same way as an individual psyche —they argue that, in order to register as 'traumatic' at a social level, an event must be recurrently designated as such— they do recognise a powerful connection between individual experience of trauma and the collective one (101). And they are not the only scholars to affirm this. *Moses and Monotheism* (2010b) is Freud's attempt to establish this connection. Freud invites the reader to "assume that in the history of the human species something happened similar to the events in the life of the individual" (Freud, 2010b: 129). He adds that "the concordance between the individual and the mass is […] almost complete. The masses, too, retain an impression of the past in unconscious memory traces" (151). Similarly, Jeffrey C. Alexander suggests paying attention to the constant exposure to violence and oppressive discourse that marginalises collective minority groups since individual experiences of pain and suffering, stemming from the same rationale, transcend individuality and end up affecting the whole community and its group consciousness. This phenomenon marks their memories forever and changes their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways, and leads to the construction of a collective type of trauma (Alexander, 2012: 3). In the

same vein, Frantz Fanon (1986) claims that the repeated subjection to disempowerment and denial of autonomy makes socially mistreated and alienated groups develop and internalise a destructive psychological system of self-hatred and communal insecurity. Cathy Caruth also reflects on trauma's social dimension, and suggests that traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos, or what she calls 'a group culture' (Caruth, 1995a: 185).

Kai Erikson, however, does emphasise a distinction between individual and collective trauma. On the one hand, he means by individual trauma "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively" (Erikson, 1976: 153-54). On the other hand, by collective trauma he refers to "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community" (154). He adds:

> The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma'. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (154)

Erikson distinguishes here between the psychological nature of individual trauma and the social nature of the collective one. For her part, Caruth concedes that, "when the community is profoundly affected, one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way that one would speak of a damaged body" (Caruth, 1995a: 188), which may give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special (186). She mentions the creation of a spiritual kinship, a source of communality and a sense of identity. Stemming from this, she develops the idea that trauma has both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies: "It draws one away from the centre of group space while at the same time drawing one back" (186). Estrangement, in this case, becomes the basis for commonality and may bring victims together to form a collective.

Martha Wolfenstein called this 'post-disaster utopia' (1957); it is as if survivors, digging out from under the masses of debris, discover that the communal body is not only intact, but uses its remaining resources to recuperate and consolidate. These disasters often seem to force open

whatever chasms once ran silently through the structure of the community, not necessarily with the purpose of strengthening the bonds linking people together, but transforming the shared experience into a sort of 'common culture' and a source of kinship. Communal trauma, then, can take two forms, either alone or in combination: it can damage the tissues that hold human groups intact, or it can develop social climates and communal moods that eventually dominate a group's spirit (Erikson, 1995: 190).

This also points at Dominick LaCapra's idea of 'founding trauma' (2014) which sprouts from collective identity problems stemming from a generalised discrimination or violence inflicted on a specific community. He argues that "it is misguided to see trauma as a purely psychological or individual phenomenon. It has crucial connections to social and political conditions" (LaCapra, 2014: xi). He defines 'founding trauma' as the crisis or catastrophe that, although disorients and harms the collectivity, may transform or be transvalued into a legitimating myth of origins and serve an ideological function in authorising acts or policies that appeal to it for justification —a cultural 'big-bang' (xii). It is, thus, a trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity.

This can indeed be applied to the Dalit community, since trauma affecting individuals and collectives, and dovetailing into resilience, consolidate among them a sense of cultural identity. Dalit writings link the individual body's suffering with collective trauma. The Dalit 'body' is more than the biological body of the individual; it represents the body of a community or caste. The survivor or traumatised body is located within a social body, where suffering is not simply inscribed upon the individual, but rather proceeds from a systemic condition that affects the social body of a community. Following Alexander's precept of 'cultural trauma' (Alexander, 2012), casteist oppression and the trauma emanating from it enable Dalits to build solidarity, assign responsibility for the causes of their trauma and, thereby, constitute a domain of political action (Nayar, 2012).

This connection between the suffering of an individual body and the suffering of the social body of the community is clearly displayed by Valmiki when he writes: "The cuts I have received in the name of caste, even aeons won't suffice to heal them" (Valmiki, 2003: 52). He also emphasises that "The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine" (vii). While those wounds are traumatic events —which include beatings, ritual humiliations, social practices of physical distancing— inscribed on the individual body, Valmiki explains that they

are actually symbols of a larger injury to Dalits as a whole. He thus situates his own suffering within the cultural-economic condition of caste and casteist discrimination, and it is precisely this 'location' of trauma that stakes a claim to recognise the collective nature of individual Dalit pain.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that, in most Dalit texts, the specific names of oppressors are not mentioned, even though specific incidents of oppressions are elaborated on. This use of anonymity could be a deliberate move to ascribe the oppressors with a larger, more universal embodiment. As Pandian notes,

> The concept of anonymity in narration has a special function. By refusing to give names, Bama is perhaps trying to make a universal statement about oppression even though it exists at the local level […]. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. (Pandian qtd. in Kumar, 2010: 233)

Therefore, while the experiences displayed in Dalit texts are personal and specific, the trauma they face can be understood as cultural and collective. Elaborating on the nature of collective suffering, Jeffrey C. Alexander puts forward that traumatic status should be interpreted in terms of how 'abruptly' it affected the individual or collective identity of a group, rather than on account of its actual harmfulness or effect (Alexander, 2012: 14). The abruptness of a traumatic phenomenon should not be considered as a major factor in deciding what is damaging and traumatic to collective identity, especially in the context of those communities that have been facing harassment on a daily basis, like the Dalits. This, though not abrupt, is certainly traumatic.

As can be seen from the theories so far developed, apart from the dramatic loss of identity, or the tear in the social fabric (Eyerman, 2001: 2) —what Freudenburg and Jones have referred to as 'corrosive communities' (1991)— cultural or collective trauma can also paradoxically lead to a process of consolidation of identity. Negative and/or threatening experiences can serve as factors that unify and mobilise groups, or even foster in-group preferences, thus encouraging people to gain a deeper understanding of one's own group (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Dalits' experiences, albeit individual, become an account of the entire Dalit community and their collective experiences, as Sarah Beth concludes (2007). This collective experience of suffering can result in a feeling of collective victimhood, defined by Bar-Tal et al as

> [a] mindset shared by group members that results from a perceived intentional harm with severe and lasting consequences inflicted on a collective by another group or groups, a harm that is viewed as undeserved, unjust, and immoral and one that the group was not able to prevent. (2009: 238)

Schori-Eyal, Klar, and Ben-Ami (2017) show how the perceived 'group victimhood' can be self-perpetuating in nature and operate as cognitive schema, elucidating the processes of communal attribution and categorisation. In the case of the Dalit community, their shared suffering can create a sense of 'Dalit victimhood' as a result of historical caste-based degradation. According to Geetha, "when one's corporeal and spiritual existence is itself considered evidence of one's lowness, when being […] is disallowed by the knowledge of its integrity, its claim of self-respect, then a profound crisis besets the self", which this critic labels as 'ontological wounding' (Geetha, 2009: 95).

As Dalits are slowly representing their own lives and experiences, their collective victimhood is being reinterpreted, even deconstructed. Their distorted self-image and low socially-sanctioned position —nurtured for so long— are being negotiated and challenged. They strive to reposition themselves socially and to begin an agentic transformation from passive victims to active and resilient agents. This transition in the meaning of 'being' is facilitated by the process of 'becoming', a social repositioning of identity that involves recognising, deconstructing and reinterpreting the sense of imposed victimhood. 'Becoming' occurs, in William Connolly's words, "when a culturally marked constituency, suffering under its current social constitution, strives to reconfigure itself by moving the cultural constellation of identity/difference then in place" (Connolly, 1996: 255-56). It is a paradoxical politics whereby "new cultural identities are formed out of old energies, injuries and differences" (261). While it is in motion, the politics of becoming also changes the shape and contour of established identities, thus mapping the route from becoming to belonging.

The politics of becoming is a self-conscious movement, a re-invention of the 'we', to echo Martha Minow (1996), which interrogates the foundations of culture, transgressing every notion of territoriality and identity. This transgression intends to obstruct and fragment the re-solidification of being and to entail a route to resistance. The politics of becoming and belonging is, then, an essentially enabling, fundamentally transformative process that

reconstructs Dalits' victimhood and leads them towards resistance and assertion. Thus, Dalits' victimhood, if used for the right purpose and in the right manner, can act as a 'vehicle of emancipation' and as a tool to generate a collective identity that is agentic, forceful and transformative (Zelliot, 2001b). As a symbolic meta-resource recurrent in many oppressed and marginalised narratives, collective victimhood is expressed and employed in Dalit texts as an instrument of revolt and transformation that instigates the spirit of social movements by converting anguish into anger.

Loss, Absence and Recovery

In spite of creating a collective identity of suffering fellows who can aspire to join forces and speak with a common voice, collective or cultural trauma is, nevertheless, problematic. While some theorists assume that trauma affects communities in basically the same way as it does individuals, others have questioned the indiscriminate extension of clinically derived terms to larger entities, and have suggested considering collective or cultural trauma as social constructs (Bond & Craps, 2017: 94). One of these scholars is Dominick LaCapra, who underlines the importance of distinguishing between historical loss and structural absence.

For him, loss is the product of discrete historical events, linked to memory, which result from the removal or destruction of a person, place, or thing; he calls this 'historical trauma'. Structural absence or 'structural trauma', on the other hand, refers to the lack of foundations —be they referential, ideological, theological, or some other structural component— that have never existed and are associated with history (LaCapra, 2014). He warns against the tendency to conflate these two concepts arguing that, although they should not be simply opposed, as they do interact in complex ways in any concrete situation, history and memory are modes of inscription that certainly should not be confused (xx). Despite the existence of reasons for the vision of history as a whole as traumatic, he criticises the obsession with rash amalgamations which consider contemporary culture, or even history, as essentially and universally traumatic and which, subsequently, renders everyone as trauma victims (xxx).

In order to avoid this problematic overgeneralisation, LaCapra calls for the necessary distinction between structural, or transhistorical trauma, and historical trauma. To put it differently, absence —especially the absence of undivided origins, absolute foundations, or

perfect, totalising solutions to problems— must be set against loss. “Failure to make these distinctions”, he warns, “eventuates in a misleadingly hypostatized notion of constitutive loss or lack which may well be a secular variant of original sin” (xxxiv). In other words, the resulting confusion can lead to both an unhealthy elevation of victimhood and the marginalisation of particular traumatic events; to quote LaCapra’s words, it may foster “the conflation of a putatively transhistorical condition of abjection with the specific problem of victimization, thereby both adding to the allure of victimhood and obscuring the status of discrete historical victims” (116).

In an obvious and restricted sense, losses may entail absences, but the converse need not be the case. By situating absences on a transhistorical level and losses on a historical one, LaCapra implies that absence is not an event and does not imply tenses —past, present, or future. By contrast, the historical past is the scene of narratable specific losses that involve particular events. The nature of losses varies with the nature of events and responses to them; some losses may be traumatic while others are not, and they may also differ in intensity or impact. It is misleading, thus, to situate loss on a transhistorical level, “something that happens when it is conflated with absence and conceived as constitutive of existence” (49). In terms of absence, it should be grasped that “one cannot lose what one never had. Absence is the missing of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized” (50). Loss, on the other hand, is often correlated with lack, both in the present and the future, as the latter is frequently understood as implying a loss. Absence, he argues, may be converted into a lack, a loss, or both (53).

For LaCapra, the failure to narrow down the traumatic source and the exposure to this easy conflation enhance the potential for problematic modes of ‘unreflexive’ processes of overidentification with the suffering of others, or what he calls ‘vicarious victimhood’. This is why, for LaCapra, the relationship between individual, collective, and cultural trauma is important to establish. Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. Therefore, given the ability of trauma of permeating the psyche of people who did not experience the traumatising events themselves, it is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim entitled to the victim’s voice or subject position.

Apart from the issue of transmissibility and illegitimate identification, LaCapra also takes issue with the idea that traumatic experience engenders an ongoing, transmissible, and potentially endless crisis of survival. His complaint is that the entanglement of discrete instances of historical loss with the foundational problem of structural absence may not only universalise trauma, but most importantly, would frustrate any possibility of recovery.

In placing trauma beyond articulation, Caruth points to a gap "at the heart of language as the causal factor in the failure to fully articulate experience. The rending of word and world becomes the origin of a structural trauma that frustrates all attempts at historical understanding" (Caruth, 1996: 18). As she goes on to explain, for history to be a history of trauma means that "it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or […] can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (20). By conflating structural and historical trauma in this way, Caruth blurs the distinction between the permanent referential failure —one of the focuses of poststructuralist theory— and the specific psychological consequences of particular historical catastrophes.

LaCapra insists that absence at a foundational level cannot simply be derived from particular historical losses, and the conversion of absence into loss can manifest as 'misplaced nostalgia' that prompts a quest for a utopian politics of unified community. Conversely, when loss is mistaken for absence, a form of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia can arise. The conversion of absence into loss can also lead to anxiety, melancholic paralysis, or manic agitation regarding the identification of an object —the lost object— and may generate the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome. By contrast, the anxiety attendant upon absence may never be entirely eliminated or overcome, but must be lived with in various ways (LaCapra, 2014: 57). In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated (58). This may give way to melancholic nostalgia "in the *recherche du temps perdu*" (59; emphasis in the original). As a consequence, the belief that everyone is a victim or that all history is trauma —generating the feeling of a 'wound culture'— may develop (64); against this, he insists that "Paradise absent is different from paradise lost" (57):

> The conflation of absence and loss induces either a metametaphysical etherealization, even obfuscation, of historical problems or a historicist, reductive localization of transhistorical, recurrently displaced problems, or perhaps a

> confusingly hybridized, extremely labile discourse that seems to derive critical analyses of historical phenomena directly from the deconstruction of metaphysics and metametaphysical, at times freely associative (or disseminatory), glosses of specific historical dynamics. (195)

Nevertheless, LaCapra also contends that this blurring of absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic state of mind, with disorientation, agitation, or even confusion as clear markers (46). This idea, borrowed from Caruth (1995a), sustains that the conflation of both concepts attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past and finds it difficult to distinguish between both. Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now.

In the last decades, many subaltern literatures have tackled several lifetime exposures to suffering containing an underlying sense of loss —the lost homeland, ancestors, and even culture. However, the fact that this suffering has been extended in time, permeating generations, and has sprouted from different sources, hinders its reduction to a particular disturbing event. This is the case of the oppression inflicted by the colonial agenda, which Frantz Fanon explains as follows: "because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a […] determination to deny [him] all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'" (Fanon, 2004: 250). Fanon clearly alludes to the complex and many-sided matrix of abuse and repression which results in a generalised crisis of the self and the community.

In Dalit literature, as in most subaltern literature, the exposed crisis of humanity cannot be reduced to a lost homeland, nor a lost generation, but it is rather attributable to being the 'other', peripheral in their own country, and systematically silenced by a discriminatory cultural heritage. Velutha and his father Vellya Paapen, Bama, Baby Kamble, and most of Bagul's characters —and the Dalit community in general— do not suffer a loss related to a specific breaching historical event; they suffer an absence of human rights, dignity and equality of opportunities, which thus becomes a structural trauma which can only be lived with and tolerated, and which creates the erosion or fragmentation of the self, as well as voicelessness and dissociation, on account of a continuing discrimination. The difficulty Dalits face in this regard is that there is no actual record of their original condition; there are no existing historical

memories of a better state they could struggle to recover, a lost culture they could resurrect. There is, thus, tension between the idea that Dalits actually become Dalits through the experience of oppression —that casteism and its oppression are what forged their identity— and the need to recover a sense of cultural selfhood that somehow 'predates', ontologically, historically, and ethically, this identity of suffering. While, on the one hand, the goal is to form a common 'Dalit' identity, on the other, the goal is to lose that same identity.

Conversely, the fact that there are no clear-cut and demarcated events to account for a defined breaching in their lives does not imply that they do not suffer from any loss. It can be argued, to some extent, that they suffer from a historical loss of dignity and social status on account of traceable historical events compiled in literary repositories. Untouchability has an origin, be it convoluted and tricky to pinpoint in a straightforward manner or attributable to a single event or cause. It would be thus inappropriate and reductive to discard historical trauma in their case and ascribe their suffering to simple cumulative absence. When Kamble refers to intergenerational trauma and loss, she maps a continuum, a legacy of ignorance and permanent repression engineered by the upper castes. As knowledge is the marker of power and social control, the rhetoric of loss in the case of Dalits also includes this loss of knowledge and subsequent simple-mindedness. Kamble focuses on the loss of reason as a condition that confines the Dalits, as "our reason was gagged" (2008: 49). She, nevertheless, shifts the horizon of action:

> We may be coarse and ignorant, yet you must admit that we have been the most devoted children of Maharashtra, this land of our birth, and it is we who are the true heirs of this great land. You played with our lives and enjoyed yourself at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything, but never the truth. (37)

The rhetoric of loss also gestures at the loss of land, birth right and a dignified life. In *Karukku*, Bama records the loss of individual and communal dignity by describing the fear instilled in her fellow women when the police patrolled their quarters arresting and torturing their men and humiliating them (Bama, 2014: 30-1). This loss of self-worth was experienced from an early age as she felt "shamed and insulted in front of all the children" (16) by the headmaster on a daily basis at school. If human rights are premised upon human dignity, then such accounts clearly point to contexts in which particular individuals, due to their ethnic or caste identity, suffer a clear disenfranchisement. Therefore, the most adequate approach to define Dalits'

trauma is to recognise it as a combination of historical and transhistorical suffering, as both phenomena have interacted and contributed to the present result and state of affairs.

One of the reasons behind LaCapra's insistence on the importance to discern loss from absence when it comes to trauma is the significance of not dwelling on it, but work towards recovery. In this, LaCapra makes the crucial distinction between two apparently oppositional responses to trauma: working-through and acting-out. After an overwhelming and shattering event which, as Caruth states, escapes normal registration in the victim's memory (1995a), the event may somehow register in one's traumatic memory and may actually be relived in the present, at times in a compulsively repetitive manner. This reliving may not be subject to controlled, conscious recall but, as if there were no difference between past and present, whether or not the past is re-enacted or repeated in its precise literality, one feels as if one were back there reliving the event. This is why LaCapra argues that in these cases the distance between here and there, then and now, collapses (LaCapra, 2014: 88-9), a phenomenon that he has denominated as the symptomatic 'acting-out' of trauma, in which temporal distinctions break down and action in the present risks being inhibited.[120] Acting out is related to the tendency to repeat something compulsively: "A tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" (142-43). Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation since the individual 'disorientingly' feels what s/he cannot represent and, in turn, 'numbingly' represents what s/he cannot feel. Traumatic '*Dasein*' haunts or possesses the self, is acted out or compulsively repeated, and may not be adequately symbolised or accessible in language —at least in any critically mediated and controlled manner.

Given this circumstance, LaCapra stresses the need to move from acting-out to what he identifies as 'working-through', a process that restores the distinctions between past, present, and future, and allows for political agency. Working-through involves "the effort to articulate and rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract […] that disabling disassociation" caused by trauma (42). In other words, working-through is a process of gaining critical distance on traumatic experiences and re-contextualising them in ways that permit a reengagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities (45). For LaCapra, working-through is one possible means of frustrating the

[120] Jacques Derrida terms this breakdown of distinctions as 'undecidability' (1994).

repetition compulsion and resisting the possibility of forming a destructive attachment to the past. "When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma" (90).

These different positions are indicative of a tension within trauma theory between those who are primarily concerned with doing justice to traumatic repetition as a sign of survival, and those who seek to heal from trauma as if one were to be able to fully re-engage with life (Bond & Craps, 2017: 73-4). By collapsing the distinction between past and present, acting-out maintains "the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or reengagement with life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past" (LaCapra, 2014: 22).

In fact, although working out is the desirable outcome, LaCapra argues that the process of acting out should not be discredited altogether. He maintains that both acting out and working through are intimately related parts of a process, and thus, acting out may even be necessary or inevitable. He argues that, on a certain level, there is an unavoidable "tendency to repeat which, if not confronted, tends to take place in a blind and unchecked manner to return as the repressed or to recur as the dissociated" (143). In the same vein, working through does not mean a complete avoidance of suffering or a direct harmonisation between past and present. "It means coming to terms with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling" (144). It would be deceptive, therefore, to conceive working-through in terms of a cure, consolation, uplift, or complete closure. LaCapra considers them as non-binary terms and interrelated modes of responding to trauma —especially to the historical type— and invites critics to question overly sharp boundaries.

The phenomenon of acting out is clearly displayed in Anand's *Untouchable*. After suffering the attack in the city from an upper-caste passer-by, Bakha remains tormented for the rest of the day, and involuntarily relives the event once and again. He ponders over the shattering event and its cause precisely when he feels the calmest, while his afflicted body rests in the field under the soothing heat of the sun. Apart from providing him with physical warmth, the sunshine also serves as a psychologically enlightening and insightful source:

> Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. […] It was all explicable now. 'I am an Untouchable!' he said to himself, 'an Untouchable!' he repeated the words in his mind. (Anand, 2014: 42)

After the traumatic event, Bakha is haunted by the burden of the physical and moral barrier between him and the upper castes, even when he heads to the village temple with the intention of confronting the priest that abused his sister Sohini. The rage he previously felt through his veins is being slowly replaced by a daunting feeling of numbness. He has lost his grace and has become "the humble, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything" (48). He was "cowed back" and the sense of fear "came creeping into him" (53). Thus, although Bakha stepped outside of the event in the city apparently unharmed, he was certainly overwhelmed by it:

> [Bakha] could not overstep the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their weakness against him. He could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low-caste man. So in the highest moment of his strength, the slave in him asserted itself, and he lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances. (54)

Most of casteist trauma victims suffer from a blockage that prevents them from reacting against their oppressors, or even acknowledging what is actually happening to them, but they are nonetheless constantly haunted by memories that devour them inside. Although Bakha was utterly amazed by the hat left at the barracks, he did not have the courage to ask a sepoy to give it to him. The incomprehensibility of his sudden paralysis and lack of drive troubles him: "Why is it that I can't go and ask now but dared to do so when I was a child?" (88). Yet, he could not fathom it: "He didn't know that with the growth of years he had lost the freedom, the wild, careless, dauntless freedom of the child, that he had lost his courage, that he was afraid" (88).

Most Dalits accepted and assimilated the idea of 'untouchability' and were aware of their potential to defile, up to such a point that they were troubled by it at every step: "Of course, I polluted the child. I couldn't help doing so. I knew my touch would pollute. […] I only get

abuse and derision wherever I go. Pollution, pollution, I do nothing else but pollute people" (101). Bakha acts out his trauma compulsively and disorderly:

> Why was all this? […] Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! […] Why didn't I shout to warn the people of my approach? I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. But why couldn't I say something? Couldn't I have joined my hands to him and then gone away? […] Why are we always abused? […] For them I am a sweeper, sweeper —untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable! (42)

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, the phenomenon of acting out is clearly illustrated in Chapter 10, titled "Mischief by Fire", in which Kandasamy describes the fire that killed the Dalit victims. The lack of punctuation turns the whole chapter into a single sentence, thus mirroring the fragmented, convoluted, and distorted memory of survivors:

> [a]nd in desperation a mother throws her one-year-old son out of the burning hut but the boy is caught by the leering mobsters and chopped into pieces and thrown back in and in that precise yet fleeting moment of loss and rage everyone realizes that they would die if their death meant saving a loved one and that they would die if their death meant staying together and that they would die anyway because it would not be as disastrous as living long enough to share this sight and so alone and together they prepare to resign themselves to the fact that they have mounted their collective funeral pyre (Kandasamy, 2014: 164)

LaCapra recognises that he based his formulation of 'acting out' and 'working through' on Freud's psychoanalytical concepts of 'melancholia' and 'mourning'. He adapted Freud's model for his account of acting-out and working-through, and developed them in such a way that they have become especially interesting for use in historical studies. Nevertheless, contrary to LaCapra's approach, Freud (1917) does recognise melancholia (*Melancholie*) and mourning (*Trauer*) as mutually exclusive reactions to loss.

While LaCapra argues that "specific phantoms that possess the self or the community can be laid to rest through mourning only when they are specified and named as historically lost

others" (LaCapra, 2014: 65), Freud saw melancholia as a stage in which the depressed, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains identified with the lost object. By contrast, he considers that mourning could bring the possibility of engaging with trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or 'recathexis' of, life which allows one to begin again; it would mean, in a way, a homeopathic process of repetition that allows for certain critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal. Through this, one would be able to distinguish between past and present, and to recognise an event as having happened back then (Freud, 1917). Hence, melancholia might be seen as a form of acting out, while mourning might be compared to working through.

In a melancholic state, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present, rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity as it recognises the difference between past and present, "simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life" (LaCapra, 2014: 70-1). While the melancholic and the mourner might both begin with a basic denial of their loss, over time the mourner relinquishes his/her attachment to the lost object and is able to engage with the possibility of a future. The melancholic, on the other hand, maintains an ongoing and overwhelming attachment to the past, making it impossible for him/her to engage fully with the present. Additionally, Freud acknowledges two ways of mourning; he argues that the one that completely transcends the past is not desirable, and he guides towards the type of mourning that is virtually indistinguishable from endless melancholy and contains certain degree of compulsive repetition (1917). However, the approximation, or even conflation, of melancholy and mourning often induces an 'impossibly mournful response'. LaCapra will conclude that, when mourning turns to absence and absence is conflated with loss, mourning becomes impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving, scarcely distinguishable from interminable melancholy (LaCapra, 2014: 76-7). Without working through, then, mourning may be treated as endless grieving.

Jacques Derrida's mid-mourning approach, on the other hand, is based on constantly working over and through traumatic experiences at a communal level, which points to a constant re-enactment of the traumatic event. This constant reliving may actually lead to its understanding and inclusion in one's conscious psyche, being thus a potentially appropriate approach when dealing with trauma in marginalised communities. Yet, Derrida goes one step further and

develops the idea of no temporal point of pure origin, but only an "always-already absent present" that he calls 'hauntology' (1987). This may be in tune with Dalits' trauma and oppression, whose origins are problematic to trace and pigeonhole. Derrida's hauntology discusses the existence of spectres that cannot be ontologised and will consequently continue to problematise or haunt some historical discourses. For this, he proposes an interminable mourning labelled as 'demi-devil' —or mid-mourning— (335) as a productive way to negotiate unsettled oppressive experiences, as is the case of Dalits' caste-based trauma. This intermediary possibility of partial mourning also points to LaCapra's idea that trauma may never be fully resolved.

Furthermore, while trauma theory is quick to interpret people's responses to extreme events in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder, many scholars uphold that, apart from acting out and working through, there are other kinds of possible responses. As Roger Luckhurst points out, "PTSD has a shadow condition that has been theorized in parallel with the emergence of trauma: resilience", which is defined as "positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luckhurst, 2008: 210). He questions the tendency to pathologise signs of resilience as evidence of 'absent grief' (210) and the assumption that "the impossible, aporetic or melancholic response is the only appropriately ethical condition for individuals and communities defined by their post-traumatic afterwardsness" (211-12).

Another alternative to PTSD that is closely related to resilience, and which has also gained relevance in recent years, is the concept of 'post-traumatic growth', coined by the psychologists Lawrence Calhoun and Richard Tedeschi in the 1990s to describe "positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a traumatic event" (1999: 11). Associated with changes in the domains of self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and life philosophy, traumatic experiences can take the form of greater appreciation for life, closer relationships with others, visualising new opportunities, a sense of increased personal strength, and positive spiritual change. In *Untouchable*, Anand displays this phenomenon of post-traumatic growth in Bakha, as he is portrayed as learning from abuse and gaining mental and physical strength on account of it:

> It had seemed to him that the punishment was good for him. For he felt he had learnt through it to put his heart into his work. He had matured. […] He had developed

> into a big strong man, broad-shouldered, heavy-hipped, supple-armed, as near the Indian ideal of the wrestler as he wished to be. (Anand, 2014: 104-05)

The increased attention to resilience and post-traumatic growth serves as a welcome reminder of the plurality of responses to trauma, although they should nonetheless be approached with a sceptical eye insofar as they might be used to promote political 'quietism'. As Luckhurst adamantly points out, resilience "is not really the basis […] for any form of cultural or political critique" (2008: 211). The oversimplification of complex global problems may well be potentially depoliticising.

LaCapra also warns against what he calls 'negative sublimity' of trauma. He explains it as the phenomenon through which victims of traumatising events, as well as those empathising with them, may resist the process of working through because of a 'fidelity to trauma', "a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it" (LaCapra, 2014: 22). This could be due to the perception that, in working through the past towards survival, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. "One's bond with the dead, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound", LaCapra elucidates (22). He adds that this process of converting trauma into an occasion for sublimity has become a tendency in modern culture: "In the sublime, the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy" (23). This, LaCapra contends, may dangerously lead to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, endlessly melancholic and impossible mourning, and resistance to working through (23). This negative sacrality may also give rise to what may be termed as 'founding trauma', or trauma that paradoxically becomes the valorised or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group, rather than the disruptive and disorienting events that problematise the process of identity formation (161).

In view of the previous theories discussed, it could be assumed that Dalit writing mainly portrays an in-between category of acting-out and working through, or what Derrida has termed as mid-mourning. Writers display the pervasiveness and harassment of the traumatic experiences cast upon Dalits and the consequences they have on both the individual and communal selves. However, by writing about them and narrativising their traumatic memories, they are not only reliving them in a compulsive and uncontrolled manner, but are also

processing them to some extent, trying to make sense of them and grasp their ultimate causes and consequences.

The Ethical Dimensions of Writing about Trauma

Literature can help make visible and intelligible the suffering of individuals and communities that stems from exploitation and abuse; it can bring peripheral suffering to a wider public consciousness, and act as an incentive for a sustained and systemic critique of societal conditions. While a culture of sentimentality is indeed suspect in its potential to substitute political action, empathy with the pain of others can serve as a motivation to work towards genuine change. However, dealing with trauma is problematic and writing about it is not an easy and straightforward process; it raises many conflicts regarding subject matter and other ethical questions as to the implications and effects of witnessing, representing and reading.

Witnessing

After going through a traumatic experience, be it as a witness to one's own traumatic experience, a witness to the suffering of others, or a witness to the process of witnessing itself (Laub, 1995: 61), Dori Laub points to an imperative to tell and be heard. Yet, this critic acknowledges that no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to a traumatic experience: "There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured […]" (63). Despite the complexity of 'telling', silence is an undesirable outcome since, apart from cultivating a distorted memory, it also serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny (64). This makes up for the survivors' necessity for a witness, but also for a platform for reliving and addressing their wrongs. In keeping with this, Shoshana Felman theorises that to bear witness to a traumatic event is to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth; to accomplish a speech act or discursive practice, rather than to simply formulate a statement (Felman, 1995: 17). The simple act of writing is, thus, presented as an act of bearing witness to trauma, and therefore "one does not have to possess, or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it" (24).

Taking Caruth's understanding of 'trauma' as a basis, testimony cannot be authentic without a crisis that breaks and transvaluates previous categories and frames of reference. In contrast to narrative memory, which is an ordered and controlled social act, traumatic memory is an inflexible and invariable solitary act. Pierre Janet also observed that traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions; it occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation, a mechanism he calls '*restitutio ad integrum*' (Janet, 1928). Laub also contends that the force and impact of a shattering event may be such so as to hinder the possibility for a potential witness to testify, or "to remove [oneself] sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely *outside* […]" (Laub, 1995: 66; emphasis in the original). This reasoning posits that there is often no 'untainted' or integral observer to step outside of the "coercively totalitarian and dehumanising frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed" (66). Precisely this loss of capacity to witness and to detach oneself is, for Laub, the true meaning of traumatic annihilation.

Testimony is, therefore, the mechanism whereby the narrator —or survivor— reclaims his/her position as a witness, and actively repossesses his or her own story towards a process of survival. It entails an inevitable and necessary confrontation with loss, a journey through pain, but with a certain level of detachment. This combination of detachment and integration between traumatic memory and narrative memory is what concerns many scholars. They fear that this narrativisation of trauma might loosen the precision and impact of the original event and, most importantly perhaps, its very incomprehensibility. Sonia Schreiber Weitz has described this as follows: "To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible" (Weitz qtd. in Caruth, 1995a: 154).

Witnessing can also be regarded as the reconstruction of lived events in verbal narrative elsewhere. In the case of Dalit literature, the protagonist —survivor and/or narrator— is engaged in a "retrospective testimonial act" (Hesford, 2004: 106) of personal but also communal suffering and survival. Each Dalit text is primarily an autobiography; however, the narrators' ability to shift narration between one's own life and the life of the community creates an indissoluble connection between individual and communal suffering. This ubiquitous

rhetoric of community has encouraged many critics to consider Dalit memoirs as *testimonio*.[121] Bama's *Karukku* and Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, for instance, clearly resist becoming wholly autobiographical to produce, instead, an ethnography. At no point do Kamble or Bama tackle only their own trauma; they become 'synecdoches' of their communities. Kamble declares that she "wrote about what my community experienced" (Kamble, 2008: 136). Mini Krishnan writes in the "Editor's Note to the First Edition":

> Breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama's *Karukku*, a text which is a life story that could lay the foundation for a course on Dalit memoirs. Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama's is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function. (2014: xxv)

Bama deploys a fluctuating and organic shift between the generic conventions of individual life writing and collective biography in her text. As regards Valmiki, he makes the issue of voicing communal suffering a key part of his Preface. He foresees that his readers, having seen their own pain epitomised in *Joothan*, will expect him to elaborate on his suffering, almost as though it were their own individual pain that he is describing (Valmiki, 2003: vii).

As Felman postulates, the primary requisite for a *testimonio* is that of witnessing (1995). In Dalit literature, as most writers function as witnesses, many of them relinquish the individual quality of the 'I'; instead, the first-person narrator usually speaks collectively for a marginalised group, while simultaneously maintaining the significance of the individual subject. Therefore, as representative of the collective voice, the 'self' expressed in a *testimonio* should not be defined in individual terms, but rather understood as a collective self, engaged in a common struggle. In Bama's narrative, for instance, the first person is not a unified 'I' but a collective 'our'. She narrates: "Our village is very beautiful […]. Most of our people are agricultural labourers" (2014: 1). In the first chapter of *Karukku*, even before we know anything about the narrator's life, we get a glimpse of the community. In fact, very few personal details regarding the narrator are provided at the beginning, as if her intention were that the reader

[121] The term *testimonio* is usually associated with the writings of disenfranchised individuals or communities, while 'memoir' usually signifies life-writing from élite perspectives (Geetha, 2011: 324), and 'life-writing' includes confessional forms, autofictions, diaries, journals, *Bildungsromane*, autobiographies and biomythography (Henke, 1998). A key element of postcolonial *testimonio* is the emphasis on the cultural trauma suffered by an entire community, which functions as both trope and context for symbols of protest (Nayar, 2006).

should pay attention to the structures within which Dalits' lives function, instead of focusing on her individual identity.

Meena Kandasamy also shifts perspectives through the use of personal pronouns. She deliberately mixes first, second, and third-person narration, not only to add to the polyphonic nature of the novel, but also to demonstrate the pervasiveness of trauma stemming from atrocity: "we all died a little because of the fear" (Kandasamy, 2014: 244). In *The Gypsy Goddess* no single trauma is disclosed, but a collection of different degrees of sufferings is put forth:

> We were used to it: the silence and the shouting. The songs and the tears. Wet from all our weeping, we saw the world in a blur. Death had been here, but life went on deliriously, as if it had been set on fire. (245)

Therefore, taking as a basis Jeffrey C. Alexander's idea that trauma must be first claimed and made visible by particular people to be then articulated as speech acts before an audience (Alexander, 2004: 11), it can be concluded that most Dalit texts function as speech acts wherein individual trauma is claimed on behalf of the Dalit community as a whole. Texts like Valmiki's *Joothan* underline the need of speaking and representation since, like the rest of Dalit writers, he cannot remain quiet, as that would undoubtedly mean "to erase oneself" (Valmiki, 2003: 108). Moreover, this necessity to voice and write one's grief carries along another meaningful prospect: as Judith Herman argues, writing is a powerful tool that may enable the integration of traumatic experiences and actually aid in healing and recovery (Herman, 1992b). This is what Joshua Pederson calls the 'testimonial power of literature' (Pederson, 2014: 334).

Representing

The potential of literature to bear witness to trauma is unquestionably problematic, precisely because of the 'unrepresentable excess' of extreme events. Jean-François Lyotard, among other scholars, has tackled this problem of adequacy in the discursive and affective responses to trauma; in other words, how to respond to, and give an account of, traumatic limit events and their effects in peoples' lives in a variety of genres (Lyotard, 1988). Any answer to this question would be troublesome and paradoxical since trauma invites distortion, disruption of genres,

and collapse of distinctions. Regarding the most allegedly suited narrative modes to render traumatic events in ways that do not harmonise, stylise, or even airbrush them, Caruth argues:

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (Caruth, 1996: 10)

The apparent implication is that literature, in its very excess, can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory. Anne Whitehead adds to this claiming that "Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (Whitehead, 2004: 3). This thematisation and emulation of the 'unspeakability' of trauma as developed by scholars such as Caruth, Felman, Hartman, and Laub in the early 1990s is what resulted in the 'trauma fiction' genre. This category was understood as an attempt to reclaim an ethical space for the deconstruction paradigm, by stressing its usefulness as a critical tool in the interrogation of the relationship between referentiality and historical violence.[122]

In "Cultural Criticism and Society", Theodor Adorno famously declared that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (1981: 34), thus advocating for silence as the most appropriate approach. Later, Adorno readdressed his statement and clarified that literary or artistic representations are indeed helpful, as long as they adequately represent atrocity. Rather than calling for silence, he argues for a kind of art that bears witness to its own incapacity to represent the unrepresentable. Similarly, Maurice Blanchot favours a form of writing that incorporates a self-reflexive awareness of the limits of representation, a 'writing of the disaster' (1986) that confronts the catastrophe by registering its inevitable failure to adequately capture and convey it. In the same vein, the central claim of Caruth's brand of trauma theory is that

[122] 'Deconstruction' is concerned with the ways in which texts resist being reduced to a coherent and consistent meaning; rather, its focus is on the resistant materiality of the text, which produces not one meaning, nor a harmonising plurality of multiple meanings, but a number of strictly incompatible meanings that leave the reader faced with the experience of 'undecidability'. This went from being the dominant paradigm in the 1970s and early 1980s, to being increasingly maligned and marginalised in the course of the 1980s. Accused of being indifferent and irrelevant to history, politics, and ethics because of its alleged excessive fixation on language, deconstruction was eclipsed by various new paradigms that demanded more attention to 'real-world' issues.

textual undecidability or unreadability came to reflect the inaccessibility of trauma (1996: 11). She requests a speech act that "exceeds simple understanding" and defies representation, which would create the possibility of "a truly historical transmission" (1995b: 156). This is why many trauma theorists often justify their focus on anti-narrative, non-linear, fragmented forms, and point to their similarities with the actual psychic experience of trauma: "Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures", Vickroy contends (2002: 3).

In an attempt to distinguish between writing trauma and writing about trauma, LaCapra argues that, while writing about trauma is a historiographical aspect that aims at reconstructing the past as objectively as possible, writing trauma could be viewed as one of its 'telling aftereffects'. As such, it involves processes of acting out, working over and, to some extent, working through in analysing and 'giving voice' to the past, which embodies altogether a process of coming to terms with traumatic experiences and articulating them in different combinations and hybridised forms (LaCapra, 2014: 186-87).

Recently, however, a new trend has emerged which deviates from this aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia in the trauma canon, accusing the latter of being restrictive and limited to a selection of texts, and actually omitting the diverse forms of bearing witness to trauma (Bennett & Kennedy, 2003: 10). Indigenous and subaltern writing, for instance, rarely make the cut as they often depart from the 'unspeakability paradigm' and feature witnesses who claim narrative and political agency rather than being passive, inarticulate victims (Kennedy & Wilson, 2003). Roger Luckhurst also rejects poststructuralist trauma theory's exclusive valorisation of rupture, difficulty, and impossibility, and notes that, instead of aiming towards healing, this approach is mostly concerned with sustaining irresolution and disjuncture (Luckhurst, 2008).

In the particular case of Dalit literature, the rupturing 'intrusion of the past' is clearly voiced and usually portrayed through the trope of 'the body in pain'. Shalini Ramachandran argues that "the writers effectively use the body 'in pain' to articulate protest at the severity of as well as pervasiveness of the conditions that the Dalit villager or urban underclass faces" (Ramachandran, 2004: 36). The body in pain here is, then, not only an important signifier in a semiotics of oppression, but also a permanent and evident site of traumatic memory. As to the

aesthetic dimension of Dalit *testimonio*, what Linda Brooks has termed the 'poetics' of *testimonio* (2005), the tropes, stylistic devices and aesthetic techniques that encode their discourse of atrocity, unequivocally construct a counter narrative, not only to the hegemonic and exclusivist canon of trauma but, most importantly, to the Indian mainstream one. Dalit writing calls attention to its blunt representationality and the vivid literariness of its memory. The dramatic and descriptive performativity of their testimony forges the archive of their witnessing, their survival and their identity.

In tune with the nature of Dalit literature, Judith Herman is sceptical as regards the assertion that trauma is unspeakable, or hard to express in normal language; for her, trauma is both memorable and describable (Herman, 1992b). In the Dalits' case, traumatic amnesia does not seem to occur since they have their suffering imprinted in their bodies as a constant and unavoidable reminder. In fact, writing about their suffering seems to be a necessary and cathartic process, and the clear preference of most Dalit authors for the autobiographical mode highlights this. Joshua Pederson, for instance, argues that critics should focus on the text itself, instead of looking for gaps in it, and should look for evidences of "augmented narrative details" of experience instead of focusing only on possible traumatic amnesia (Pederson, 2014: 337-39).

As for the broadening of the subject matter from individual to collective scope, if a narrative stakes its claim to cultural trauma, it should be able to capture and convey the extent of injury. Dalit writing takes recourse to a particular kind of realism to depict that extension of suffering: what Michael Rothberg terms 'traumatic realism' (2000). This method aims at shocking the reader into recognition of a world that violates all previous experiences and demands a specific kind of attention and politics and ethics of reading. Since the very category of 'traumatic realism' gestures at suffering, pain and atrocity, a central mode of capturing trauma is to render it in corporeal or somatic terms. Indeed 'trauma', in the original Greek sense of the term, means 'injury inflicted on the body'. The Dalit body is the principal site of casteist oppression, and dirt, starvation, and pain intersect to render it truly abject. What marks Dalit narrative, thus, is a generalised 'corporealisation' of social suffering in which abuse and discrimination are not carved in a concrete and distinctive body, but rather a scenery of suffering and afflicted bodies is depicted at every nook and corner. This, apart from containing a political aim, also carries out an aesthetic one.

Bama's text is irreducibly testimonial in that it is rooted in the trauma experienced through and by the body. Numerous corporeal descriptions occur in *Karukku*, and each bodily image is located within the social structures of caste; that is, caste inscribes itself into and on the Dalit body. Bearing in mind that atrocity victims are often called upon to show evidence of torture and suffering —almost as though the scars are texts that speak the language of oppression— the fact that the sensation of being wounded is recorded early in the narrative renders *Karukku* the ultimate *testimonio*: "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is" (Bama, 2014: 11). As the distinction between private and public breaks down, the descriptions of localised, individual corporeal suffering are extrapolated to larger contexts of collective pain; as such, pain moves outward from the narrator to the narrator's community, thus universalising the singular, and implying that any Dalit would have had the same experience as her.

Pederson adds that, in trauma literature, there is a distortion of time and space which deserves attention. In Dalit texts, most authors do not find it important to arrange events in chronological order, but often prioritise historical causality and relationality instead. In *Karukku*, for instance, Bama constantly shifts the focus from the village temple (Bama, 2014: 11-12), to the impact that casteism had on her education (18-22), to describing the functioning of the caste system (27-8), and back to her childhood (29). Toral Gajarawala aptly terms this as a "Dalitization of narrative time" (2013: 173).

By turning the atrocity occurring in Kilvenmani into a novel, Kandasamy also challenges narrative canons and displays the most striking aspects of the massacre as vividly as possible. She uses the text as a raw tool to dig up the hidden traumatic past: "These facts, plain and unadorned, will be rejected by those readers whose minds have been poisoned by the passion of the novel. Such injured souls […] carry a bloated imagination, sickly judgment and disgust towards […] real […] life" (Kandasamy, 2014: 99). As Dolores Herrero contends, *The Gypsy Goddess* "could consequently be read as a trauma novel that partakes of the postmodernist project that strives to bring to mind, or to remember, what official historical records have purposely relegated to forgetfulness" (Herrero, 2019: 78). Anne Whitehead explains the postmodernist agenda as follows:

> In the face of mounting amnesia, there is an urgent need to consciously establish meaningful connections with the past. Postmodernist fiction is part of this memory project. Its innovative forms and techniques critique the notion of history as grand narrative, and it calls attention to the complexity of memory. Trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit. In testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event. (2004: 82)

Apart from deploying *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1981) through a variety of narrative voices, genres, and compositional forms,[123] *The Gypsy Goddess* also lacks narrative linearity, in tune with *Karukku*, *The Prisons We Broke*, or *The God of Small Things*, which helps to support their overall traumatic *raison d'être*. The use of different narrative forms, together with the display of different outlooks on the same story —notes, dialogues, testimonies, a pamphlet, among other devices— contributes to creating an impression of distortion, disruption and incompletion, which constantly bring forth the trauma feeling.

It is obvious, thus, that Dalit *testimonio* places the individual's story in the public domain, in a discourse that makes the story shareable with others, but induces nonetheless unsettlement in the reader through a break with the 'politeness' of narration itself. In the Introduction to *Karukku*, Lakshmi Holmström warns that Dalit literature is generally not a "comfortable reading" (2014a: xx), but a reading that generates a whole new aesthetics, whereby things that cannot be written about are definitely written about.

Reading

It is a basic assumption of much trauma theory that readers or viewers should be affected by the trauma testimonies they read or listen, to given their affective or experiential dimension.

[123] Bakhtin understands language as a mode of social interaction and denies the existence of any unitary, normative language. He perceives the novel as an artistically organised social *heteroglossia* in which a multiplicity of points of view (voices representative of social classes) are displayed, thus showcasing the "internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects" (Bakhtin, 1981: 262). The novel is, therefore, an artistically literary hybrid that brings different languages in contact with one another, but without trying to establish any hierarchy between them (361).

Many scholars advise against an over-identification with the victim and survivor, and propose instead posing oneself at the right distance, between empathy and detachment.

Caruth's work heightens the potential of trauma writing by suggesting that its impact may be carried textually from person to person, or what she calls being a survivor by proxy: "You are not doing what they did, not exposed to what they were exposed to, but you must take your mind through, take your feelings through what they went through, and allow that in" (Caruth, 1995a: 145). Laub also argues that the listener's empathic engagement with the witness may lead to a partial experience of trauma (1992: 57), although he clarifies that, by sharing the experience, one does not fully become the victim. Instead, "he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective" (58).

LaCapra labels the over-identification with the suffering of another and the appropriation of the status of victim as 'vicarious or surrogate victimage' (2014: 71). In order to avoid this problematic and unfair identification, he recommends a virtual, rather than vicarious, relationship to the trauma of others which would not preclude the development of ethical forms of empathy and solidarity for victims and survivors, but would indeed refute any kind of wrong appropriation of their suffering (78). Critics in tune with LaCapra also argue against this phenomenon of 'crude or facile empathy' to favour instead a 'critical empathy' (Bennett, 2005: 21), or a kind of 'empathy-at-a-distance', which combines affect with critical awareness of the unbridgeable gap between self and other. Unsettlement, then, exists as a conscious awareness of being an 'other', a witness who will not be fully able to understand the experiences of the victim, even when one feels empathy for that victim. This is precisely what Arun Prabha Mukherjee suggests in her Introduction to *Joothan*: "*Joothan* demands a radical shift from the upper caste and upper class reader by insisting that such a reader not forget his/her caste or class privilege" (2003: xxxvii).

Testimonial Dalit narratives are not merely testimonies of a private life. They ask to be treated as a "point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*" (Felman, 1992: 2; emphasis in the original). This infiltration of the text's power through the act of reading is the ethics of reading and witnessing demanded by Dalit texts. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, for instance, the reader is constantly addressed and invited to take an active part in the novel: "Come and occupy the novel, dear reader. […] enter this story" (Kandasamy, 2014: 259-60). In the same vein, Lakshmi Holström suggests:

> What is demanded of the reader is, in Gayatri Spivak's term, 'a surrender to the special call of the text' […]. And as readers of her [Bama's] work, we are asked for nothing less than an imaginative entry into that different world of experience and its political struggle. (2014: vii)

The suggestion of an 'imaginative entry' is actually a demand that readers should respond sympathetically, as witnesses and humans, to the narrative's trauma.

This empathic 'secondary witnessing', as LaCapra terms the process, means paying attention to the irreducible heterogeneity of Dalit space, empathising with it, but never standing in for the Dalit, and considering the narrative's performance as an aesthetic and social drama that entails particular forms of reading. To take a cue from Wendy Hesford, Dalit texts call for a process of 'rhetorical listening' (2004); this phenomenon demands that readers should hear the voices of Bama, Kamble, or the ones represented by Bagul and Kandasamy, alongside those of the other unrepresented and silent/silenced Dalits. Bama has admitted that "There were many significant things that [she] chose not to recall in *Karukku*" (Bama, 2001). Similarly, Valmiki states: "In the process of writing these words, a lot has remained unsaid. I did not manage to put it all down. It was beyond my power" (2003: viii). Both statements implicitly argue that trauma exists beyond what is represented in these texts, not only in terms of the atrocities that have been left out and can only be imagined, but they also point to the silences of those Dalits who cannot voice their grievances by themselves. Moreover, the reiteration of this inability to speak reminds of the traumatic valence of the narrative. In this sense, secondary witnessing, on the one hand, asks readers to pay attention to the traumatic events displayed and, on the other, asks them to move beyond, to see the text as a metonym for something that is —and can only be— presented through this particular text. In other words, an act of ethical listening would be to understand Dalit texts as constitutes of one voice in the midst of many Dalit silences (Nayar, 2012).

CHAPTER THREE

THE EVOLUTION OF DALIT AESTHETICS

From Erasure to Containment

Untouchable and Unrepresentable

Literature is neither politically nor historically impartial. Discourses do not exist in a void; they are unmistakably impacted upon by the context in which they are developed and the author's subjectivity. Dalits' altered subalternity and the evolution of their social condition have been replicated in the realm of culture. As such, given the centuries-old hegemonic and casteist configuration of India, for a long time, there was no place for them in the literary sphere. In the same manner that society ensured its purity by relegating them to a liminal space outside the village, literature ensured that they would not pollute its pages. Their experiences of poverty, oppression and violence were considered as non-literary or 'too low' to match the high status of mainstream Indian literature. As Omprakash Valmiki attests, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations" (Valmiki, 2003: vii). Therefore, the politics of the Indian literary domain reinforced the 'outcaste' status of Dalits, rendering them not only 'untouchable', but also 'unseenable', 'unhearable', and 'unrepresentable' (Mukherjee, 2010: 1).

This politics of exclusion aimed at homogenising the 'noble' structure of Indian literature and dispelling any infiltration from a lower rank. As Baburao Bagul explains, "Writers who have internalised the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar" (Bagul qtd. in Dangle, 1992b: 285). Elitist Indian literature operated thus as the authenticated version of Indian culture, and had the legitimacy to decide in the processes of speech, narration, appropriation and occlusion up to the 20th century. The overwhelming concentration on the middle and upper castes, in terms of both subject matter and authorship, is a case in point that demonstrates that the 'pan-Indian' label used at that time was defined from a standpoint that was definitely not pan-Indian; rather,

it was marked by a strong class and caste factor that often obscured the Indian 'Other'—especially the rural and low-caste Other.

Palanimuthu Sivakami also ascribes the absence of an open dialogue on caste in the Indian literature of that time to this universalist aesthetic of mainstream Indian literature which sought to promote an image of homogeneity and equality among Indians (Sivakami, 2012: 434).[124] The privileged writer tried to create an impression of holistic authenticity regarding the depiction of India, and to appear as representative of its multiculturality. Edward Saïd accuses this standardisation and homogeneity of ideas of herding people "under falsely unifying rubrics [...] and invent[ing] collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse" (Saïd, 2003: xxii). As a consequence, individuals lose their strength, influence and mobilising power, while certain cultural forms take absolute control. He labels this as 'cultural hegemony' or 'intellectual authority', and argues that "there is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it established canons of taste and value" (19).

This universalist aesthetic was part of a clear agenda. In the first half of the 20th century, colonial domination was the major preoccupation of almost all Indian writers. The colonial discourse on India's lack of history justified the presence of colonial power, and portrayed itself as the only cohesive force capable of consolidating and preserving India's history. Indian subaltern experience and agency were clearly plotted out of this discourse. Indian historiography, on the other hand, considered colonialism as constituting a single and unified discourse of power that consolidated a distorted Indian historical narrative, and caused India's social and economic backwardness, exploitation and subjugation (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2016: 10).[125] Against this, an equally unified and powerful nationalist canon had to be built, with critical attitudes and texts shaped by an anticolonial nationalism, also labelled as 'counter-post/colonial' (Khair, 2001: 314). They aimed to deconstruct and transcend colonial realities,

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[124] Moreover, Sivakami argues that the reluctance and relative silence on the part of non-Dalits on the issue of caste amount to an assumption that confronting casteism and untouchability is the sole responsibility of Dalits (Sivakami, 2012: 434).

[125] David Ludden argues that the nationalist narrative considered colonial rule as exploitative, repressive and, therefore, anti-Indian. This view of colonialism as a homogeneous and singular structure of oppression fails to adequately explain the complex transformations in the colonial period or to articulate the diverse responses of distinct social groups within Indian society. It helped, nonetheless, the caste Hindu nationalist élite to appropriate both history and power in modern India (Ludden, 2001: 14).

re-appropriate national discourse, and ascribe agency to the colonial subaltern by means of a solipsistic perspective that stapled India together. The entire story of struggle for freedom had to be told as one of conflict between coloniser and colonised (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013a: 8). Any other agenda that might divert from it had to be excluded and silenced. Internal contradictions and complexities in the life of the colonised, such as caste, class or gender, were subsequently not addressed —at least not in a radical way— as it was believed that they would divide Indians.

This is the case of Dalits, whose social reform movements and anti-untouchability agitations were concerned with neither anticolonial nor nationalist agendas and were, thus, repressed and inhibited.[126] Moreover, invoking modern developmentalism and the constitutional abolition of caste-based discrimination, several social scholars —such as Srinivas (2003), Shah (2002), and Beteille (1997)— insisted on the fact that caste is an anachronism in modern India as caste identities have declined and transformed.[127] Therefore, the nationalist project identified the Dalit agenda —including its social and political struggles— as diverging from the main purpose, as primordial and backward, and as a product of the colonial state's patronage politics. What was considered as 'Indian literature', nationally and internationally, surely belonged to the Indian élite, and the elitist writer was blindly considered as a general informer on Indian matters.[128]

[126] On the contrary, many Dalits used the colonial state and its institutional framework to articulate their rights. A total rejection of the colonial state was, therefore, never on their agenda.

[127] The Indian government introduced policies of positive discrimination for backward groups in India because of historical social and educational barriers imposed by the dominant Hindu groups. The Indian constitution of 1950 provided the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and the Scheduled Tribes with 15 percent and 7 percent, respectively, of the seats in representative institutions, such as the Indian Parliament and state legislative assemblies, and of jobs in public education and employment. The Mandal commission report —named after B. P. Mandal, chairman of the Second Backward Classes Commission from 1979 to 1980— recommended expanding this reservation to the other Backward Classes in admissions to centres of public education and in employment, to a total of 27 percent. Srinivas, Shah, and Beteille —along with many other Indian sociologists— argued that these caste-based quotas are a legacy of colonial policies of 'divide and rule', implying that these reservations were divisive and pre-modern in nature. Thus, they actively opposed their extension through the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal commission in the 1990s (Kothari, 1998: 443; Dirks, 2001: 286-88).

[128] This simplistic identification was also promoted by a ready conferment of the élite Indians' capacity to 'ally with the disadvantaged' simply because India, as a nation, has been perceived as disadvantaged (Khair, 2001: 20).

Literature of Sympathy

Modernist, nationalist and postcolonial agendas influenced and slowly encouraged Indian élite writers to widen their scope and recognise the existence of the disenfranchised Other, such as the Dalits.[129] This recognition, however, was neither categorical nor unconditioned. Given the ingrained casteist ethos and the preconception that lower castes lack culture and refinement due to their historical dispossession and disgraceful associations, the linguistic space was considered unsuitable for them. Consequently, Dalits had to renounce their aspiration of speaking their truth, and resign themselves to the fact that they were going to be spoken for, at best.[130] bell hooks described this condescending relationship between the privileged informant/writer and the subaltern subjects as follows: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. […] I am still author, authority" (hooks, 1990: 345). In the same vein, Karl Marx assumed: "[the subalterns] cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Marx and Engels, 1950: 403).

Literature is not divorced from society, and the symbolic is not separate from the material; they must be socially interpreted. The articulation of Dalits by non-Dalit writers —whose privileged position granted them the power to animate, constitute, and represent an otherwise silent and unknown subject— occurred and acquired significance only when it appealed to the centre. In other words, by virtue of the position of the writer, Dalits were addressed only at those points and in such a way that they met the upper-caste agenda. Saïd recognises the conditional relationship between representative and represented and argues that "[n]o production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances" (Saïd, 2003: 11).

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[129] Limbale uses the term 'reformist-liberalism' to describe the politics of Dalits' inclusion in the Indian mainstream literature of modern and contemporary periods (Limbale, 2004: 5).

[130] Edward Saïd uses the Latin expression of being *in statu pupillary* to refer to many colonised Orientals' mindset who feel that being under the coloniser's guardianship, and being represented by him, is in their own best interest (Saïd, 2003: 37). He argues that Orientals are shown to be gullible, "devoid of energy and initiative," much given to "fulsome flattery, intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals" (38). While the Oriental is irrational, depraved, childlike, and "different", the European is rational, virtuous, mature and "normal" (40). The Oriental is thus contained and represented by dominating frameworks in an exercise of cultural strength.

The figure of Gandhi had a substantial effect in shaping Indian society in the first half of the 20th century, and had an equally considerable influence on the way literature came to be written in that period (Joshi, Raval & Shukla, 1978). His use of Indian mythology interwoven with history as a support for his nationalist project is a case in point. It has been too readily assumed in postcolonial contexts that the enunciation of native Indian myths worked as an act of empowerment for the subaltern. In reality, mythological epics such as the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* have been constructed and deconstructed over the centuries as political and cultural acts that shape the collective conscious and reinforce upper-caste image-making and typification of subjects. The process of typification included characters from both higher and lower castes but, in the latter's case, two kinds of characters were particularly idealised: those who accepted the traditional status quo, in spite of their own marginal status, and those who not only accepted it but vigorously implemented it (Khair, 2001: 211). This typification set a clear precedent: Dalits were to be included in Indian literary fabric providing that they met appropriate characterisation, while any dissonant voices were to be silenced.

At the same time, heralding modernity and nation building, the Gandhian programme and several upper-caste reformers intended to instil in upper-caste Hindus a sense of historical guilt and moral horror towards casteist cruelty. They called for a more equal and democratic representation of characters and contents, and infused a sense of literary commitment among upper-caste writers (Chauhan, 2008: 4).[131] This manipulation of nationalist history, according to the historian Ranajit Guha, upheld "Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite", presenting them as "promoters of the cause of the people" instead of "exploiters and oppressors" (Guha, 1988: 38).[132] This popularised a new culture of spectatorial pity and pathos towards an 'internal' problem that could be resolved from within,

[131] At this point it is necessary to distinguish between the nationalistic and the social-realistic literature of the first half of the 20th century in India, and the more psychologically aware literature from the 1960s onwards. In *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), Meenakshi Mukherjee, for example, distinguishes between the novels of the Gandhi generation and those of the post-Gandhi one. The earlier 'Gandhi' novels were concerned with socio-political problems and had a more collective subjectivity, while 'post-Gandhi' novels are more concerned with the psychological development of characters and, therefore, have a more individual focus. In the same manner, elder writers were concerned with the national upsurge, social evils and rural problems, whereas contemporary writers seize upon the more recent problems of sex, conjugal clashes, cultural chaos, loss of identity and other dilemmas of individual characters. These two literary periods reflect the changes in mental attitudes and physical realities in their narratives.

[132] Gopal Guru explains that the caste Hindu élite "develop[ed] an insight into humiliation not because they [had] an innate moral capacity", but because the "colonial configuration of power, produced by western modernity, necessarily disrupt[ed] their feudal complacency and awaken[ed] them to their own subordination within this framework of power" (Guru, 2009: 3).

by purging Hinduism of some of its evils.[133] It was meant to provide a sedative for wounds that were centuries old and, in turn, expected to stimulate feelings of gratitude, thankfulness and obedience among Dalits. As a result, those who have been previously considered as 'polluting untouchables' were now beginning to enter the literary realm.[134]

Elitist literatures began to confine the Indian Other within a discourse marked by sympathy and compassion, epitomising Dalits as objects of charity, tragic, silent, and submissive figures, reduced to a slavish mentality and in need of the upper castes' benevolent intervention. Simultaneously, qualities of upper-caste superiority were standardised, legitimating upper-caste power, and encouraging Dalits to adopt and emulate them. Thus, even while claiming sympathy, liberal reformers reinforced the pervasiveness of upper-caste dominant beliefs, and entitled Dalits to only a 'differential' equality (Chakravarti, 2003: 109-11). This maintained the centrality of the centre and recognised the periphery only to the degree that it failed or succeeded in replicating the centre.

In the history of Indian literature, Premchand (1880-1936) is considered to be one of the most important and influential Hindi writers of the 20th century. His realistic style, shaped by Gandhian ideals, converted him in a renovator of Hindi literature.[135] He favoured struggling characters belonging to low classes and castes, and wrote about social problems as a way to express social critique —what Geetanjali Pandey defined as 'social realism' (Pandey, 1989).[136] His realist mode was, nevertheless, criticised for its representational limits. He presents Dalit

[133] As we shall see later, while arousing sympathy, these representations also brought forth the limits of such discourses.

[134] There were, nonetheless, apprehensions across the literary world that such a 'lowering' of literature, especially in terms of character and language, might hold back the growth of language and literature in the long run (Dash, 2018).

[135] According to the Indian literary historian Sisir Kumar Das, "Premchand is the greatest artist of the suffering of untouchables, not only because of his great anxiety for the century-long oppression of the Harijans, but for his uncanny sense of realism with which he presents the characters belonging to the oppressed group, free from all sentimentality and pious idealism" (Das, 2002: 174). Raja Rao is another upper-caste writer who depicted lower-caste characters from a clear upper-caste viewpoint, and underscored the connection between poverty, ignorance, and gullibility. In *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), Javni —the low-caste servant— is presented as utterly thankful towards her 'betters', while Bhedia, the low caste in Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* (1993), simply desires to be a good servant.

[136] Tabish Khair warns against confusing 'social realism' with the 'domestic realism' used by most upper-caste writers throughout the 20th century so as to give certain degree of visibility to servants (Khair, 2001: 336).

characters as social types who beg readers' sympathy, erasing their identities and consolidating instead an upper-caste standpoint (Gajarawala, 2013).

In his story *Kafan* ("The Shroud") (2008 [1936]), he illustrates how a corrupt system breeds corrupt victims, such as Ghisu and Madhav —Dalit father and son.[137] They struggle to collect money for the funeral rites of Madhav's wife, but ultimately spend it on drink and gambling. At the beginning of the novel, Ghisu and Madhav are sitting outside their hut, eating roasted potatoes, and trying to ignore the screams of Madhav's wife, who is dying in childbirth inside the hut. Neither of them goes inside to see her, out of a certain shame but especially for fear that the other will eat more than his fair share of potatoes if left alone. After filling their bellies, they lie down and fall asleep in front of a dying fire. Premchand depicts them as the laziest people in the village, whose pursuit of doing as little work as possible leads them to constantly live on the edge of starvation. He writes,

> [i]n a society where the circumstances of people who laboured night and day was not much better than [Ghisu and Madhav's], that such a consciousness should be born among those who […] knew how to profit from their own impotence, and who were at times almost prosperous, should come as no surprise. (Premchand, 2008: 219-20)

When Madhav's wife and unborn child are found dead in the morning, Ghisu and Madhav resolve to beg for money to pay for the wood and shroud required for the cremation. They manage to collect five rupees for the wood, but refuse to spend the rest on a shroud that will be burned up with the bodies; instead, they spend the money on liquor. The story ends with father and son drinking themselves into oblivion, showing no respect for the woman's corpse. Thus, rather than raising Dalits' predicament, the detailed depiction of their idleness and the urging that they should stop drinking alcohol and eat meat point towards Sanskritisation, placing the responsibility of their abjectness squarely on their own shoulders.

[137] Many Dalit writers condemned Premchand's depiction of the two Dalits in "The Shroud" as confusion between economic exploitation and caste specific inequality. They accuse him of wrongly conflating Dalits with farmers and peasants (Brueck, 2014: 49).

Mulk Raj Anand also broke new ground in bringing members of the low castes to the centre of his narrations. *Untouchable* (2014) undoubtedly revolutionised the traditional portrayal of India, challenging readers with a new subject matter and introducing a gateway for the Indian writer to explore a new world of subalterns. Making use of realism, he sets his characters in desperate situations, with hardly any possibility for improvement. They are locked in poverty, fully dependent on higher castes, and driven by abuse, injustice and unattainable dreams. *Untouchable* reflects the Indian nationalist movement at its pinnacle, and uses Dalits as a vehicle for political and social reform —almost as a form of propaganda— imbuing readers with a sense of sadness and pity for them. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist Bakha — as well as his family and most Dalit characters— is presented as a mere passive recipient of others' actions and discourses; he is routinely described as a "slave" (10), "scum of the earth" (28), as having "a resigned air of fatalism" and "intense docility" (103). He is portrayed as incapable of understanding the real source of his oppression and, instead of opting for radical action, he ultimately submits to Gandhi's pacifism. Even the author's use of colonial carnivalesque in an attempt to engage with caste critically, but also comically, has a limited transgressive potential. Nicole Thiara (2016) contends that the colonial carnivalesque provides a means of condemning the practice of untouchability and the caste system without victimising Dalits, but its ambiguous nature, halfway between seriousness and comicality, elevates and denigrates at the same time. Thiara goes on to argue that, although the carnivalesque is intrinsically transgressive as regards any kind of hierarchical structure, the mockery and the grotesque can also undermine the critique at stake, turning it into a rather blunt weapon in the fight against untouchability.

Regarding Arundhati Roy's text, labelled by L. Chris Fox (2002) as a 'martyrology of the abject', *The God of Small Things*' (1997) anti-caste politics are mainly expressed through the traumatic horror of witnessing the violent destruction of Velutha. Even when he briefly acquires agency and dares to join a protest in favour of bettering workers' labour conditions, he is reprimanded for biting the hand that feeds him. Though anti-casteist in essence, this politics denies Velutha agency through and through, and renders him a martyr at best, while providing a symbolic locus on which other non-Dalit agents can focus their empathy.

This discourse of pity added another feature to Dalits' contained figure. For the most part, low castes have been characterised by a certain affinity to nature, a simplified lifestyle, a limited understanding, and an overwhelming degree of indoctrination into the dominant socio-political

culture, from which they have been largely excluded. This, according to Divya Anand, corresponds with the figure of the 'noble savage' (Anand, 2005). Dalits' close bond with nature is laid bare in *Untouchable* through the numerous references to the soothing effect that clean air and the heat of the sun have on Bakha and his fellow Dalits. By the same token, *The God of Small Things* underscores Velutha's connection with nature, particularly with the river that separates his hut from the high-caste family, and through the various and detailed descriptions of his near naked body. Particularly, in the final scene of the novel, in which Velutha meets Ammu on the banks of the Meenachal river, he appears to her as an organic part of his natural surroundings:

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. (Roy, 1997: 333-34)

Apart from arousing pity towards Dalits, another strategy employed by some upper-caste writers has been precisely the opposite: to overemphasise their qualities, thus moving from pity and condescension to fetishisation. Anand paints Bakha as a remarkable human being, beginning with his physical appearance:

> His dark face, round and solid and exquisitely well defined, lit with a queer sort of beauty […] so that you could turn round and say: 'Here is a man.' And it seemed to give him nobility, strangely in contrast with his filthy profession and with the sub-human status to which he was condemned from birth. (Anand, 2014: 13-14)

Bakha is not only intelligent, able-bodied and strong, with a broad, frank face, glistening high cheek-bones (13-14), but is also pictured as a "superb specimen of humanity" (54). He has, in Anand's words, "a sort of dignity that does not belong to the average scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean" (9). The particular kind of individuality bestowed on Bakha is heavily limited; for him to enter the upper-caste discourse as a viable protagonist, he has to get rid of anything 'Dalit', and incarnate upper-caste social virtues and physical features.

More than sixty years later, Arundhati Roy continues to aestheticise Dalits, endowing Velutha with a body made beautiful —rather than broken— by his labour. The text often elaborates on Velutha's physical beauty through the lens of upper-caste Ammu:

> She saw ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered how his body had changed —so quietly from a flat-muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with highwax body polish. (Roy, 1997: 175)

As the following passage clearly demonstrates, Ammu attributes her lover's muscular beauty to his occupation, an issue that Maryam Mirza labels as 'gratuitous eroticisation' of the working-class male body (Mirza, 2018: 291):

> As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labour had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made, had moulded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (Roy, 1997: 334)

Thus, it is almost as if low-caste characters could only be portrayed non-pejoratively by turning them into 'avatars of Brahminised gods' (Khair, 2001: 142). This has been referred to as the 'Hiranyagarbha syndrome',[138] a tendency to raise the low-caste protagonist to a privileged intellectual, spiritual, moral and physical plane, and garnish him with upper-caste social virtues, thus evading the fact that most low castes cannot possibly achieve the level reached by the low-caste protagonist. Thus, while a Dalit individual is set apart and promoted into an accessible, upper category, the Dalit masses continue to sink into the lowest social levels, and remain unnarrated. As Khair adds, the caste Other is used as a filler —maybe even a symbol— but almost never as a flesh-and-blood character who might see reality differently from his 'creator-master-author' (138).

[138] This connects with the historical Hiranyagarbha ceremony through which Brahmins incorporated the low-caste —or out-caste— king and his family as upper-caste Kshatriyas, while the rest of the tribe could only join Brahminical Hinduism at the degraded level of Shudras (Khair, 2001: 156-57).

This is how illustrated, modern and contemporary mainstream Indian literature has acknowledged the caste Others. But, rather than representing them, it has misrepresented them, in line with the larger Indian socio-political reality. The Dalit voice has been appropriated, co-opted and mediated, accommodated to the moral exigencies of the upper castes, and circumscribed by a series of casteist attitudes and judgements. This not only alienated Dalits, but it also created an alienated codification of them, which many readers embraced. As Saïd puts it:

> Truth, in short, becomes a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself […]. Cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be. (Saïd, 2003: 67)

The etching of individual characters is sometimes done either to idealise them or to simplify them, to the extent that they become embodiments of certain tendencies, or types. In this case, the eradication of the plurality of differences among Dalits is done so as to turn them into a controlled and mapped entity. By "using the universal to erase the particular" (Mohanty, 2003: 501), they are not only portrayed as simpler, but simplified into one unit. This homogenisation invariably causes and requires amnesia of those selves that do not fit the mould. This simplification emanates from the clear upper-caste perspective of these writings, but it is also part of the construction of the identity process —a process that is subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of the differences between 'us' and the 'Others'. Saïd claims that each period and society 're-create' its Others, thus pointing to a much worked-over and constant historical, social, and cultural process (Saïd, 2003: 332). However, the fact that stable essences and identities are constantly under threat distresses people, as "we all need some foundation on which to stand" (333). Consequently, the opposition between 'us' and 'them' is, and must be, reinforced.

Writers seek to 'fix' the Other resorting to generalisations and abstractions. Anand, for instance, presents a distinctive upper-caste Hindu sensibility in *Untouchable*, alienated in certain ways from Indian reality and the social Other, and resulting in a less diverse India than the real one. He reduces individuality to a typology on account of the recurrence of essentialising statements. To take such discursive representations like Anand's at face value

would be problematic and unmindful. As Saïd argues, it is a fallacy to assume that human beings can be understood on the basis of what texts say:

> [t]o formulate the [Other], to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory […] when [they] had neither been consulted nor treated as anything except as pretexts for a text […], to make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about [his] nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type […], to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts […]. (Saïd, 2003: 86)

But texts have been used —and continue to be used— in so simple-minded a way, so much so that they have acquired authority that, in time, metamorphoses into tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse (Foucault qtd. in Saïd, 2003: 94). As Saïd puts it, cultural generalisations have obtained "the armour of scientific statement and the ambience of corrective study" (149). History demonstrates that the dominant discourses have neither been interested in, nor have been capable of, discussing individuals; instead, artificial and accommodated entities have surfaced and predominated.

The fact that most writings on Dalits from that period come from writers who have not experienced Dalit life and the perspective projected is therefore a combination of external observation of Dalit life, inevitably raises issues of entitlement, voice appropriation, and accuracy of representation.[139] Therefore, the authenticity of the portrayal of Dalits —that is, how far upper-caste writers are able to reflect the real situation of Dalits' psyche and reality, and how successful they are in restoring their humanity through sympathy and shaking the readers' consciousness— is often called into question. As a matter of fact, however sympathetic, non-Dalit writers have used Dalit characters in modern Indian literature as objects of pathos, subsequently locating the impetus for social change outside of them (Brueck, 2014: 14-15). In the words of Gayatri Spivak, the dominant discourse has treated the subaltern as "an object of knowledge […] who is patronizingly considered incapable of strategy" (Spivak, 1989: 273).

[139] Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Scavenger's Son* (1994) is a good example of such writing.

For instance, although some have interpreted that Anand's *Untouchable* undercuts Gandhi's perspective by juxtaposing it against two other perspectives —that of a Muslim lawyer and a Hindu journalist— in reality both alternatives come from upper/middle-caste individuals. Moreover, the textual discourse discloses its patronising tones by discarding strategic action on the part of Bakha or others like him, as well as omitting the solutions provided by Dalit activists such as Ambedkar. Instead, the novel proffers as the most viable solutions to Bakha's misery either a change of heart among the upper castes, or to wait for technology to develop in their favour. This proves that *Untouchable* is not radical in its approach to Dalits' problems, as it cannot entertain even such non-violent actions as conversions or organised Dalit political action. Bakha does not raise his voice against the exploitative system, nor does he seek a solution to untouchability in realistic terms. At the end of the novel, he decides to obey Gandhi: "Yes, I shall go on doing what Gandhi says" (Anand, 2014: 138); at least until the flush toilet comes to his rescue. Regarding entitlement of representation, in the Afterword to *Untouchable* E. M. Forster states:

> *Untouchable* could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is a Kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution-complex. But as a child he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them, and to understand a tragedy which he did not share. He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment, and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth. It might have given him vagueness —that curse of the generalizing mind— but his hero is no suffering abstraction. Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian. (Forster, 2014: 142-43)

It is evident that "no Untouchable could have written the book" (142) that Anand wrote, for a Dalit author would not probably have created a protagonist with an "almost physical inability to revolt" (Anand, 2014: 42). The narrative has successfully erased his disruptive potentiality as well as the reality of protest undertaken by many Dalits.

More than fifty years later, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (2006) depicts lower castes' struggle for survival and their attempt to change their living conditions, having as protagonists Dalits Ishvar and Om (Dagis), and caste Hindus Dina and Maneck. Unlike pre-independence *Untouchable*, which focuses on a rural context, *A Fine Balance* showcases both rural and urban people in both pre- and post-independent India. By means of flashbacks, it displays several generations and different backgrounds, denoting the uncertainty of individual lives in turbulent India, particularly the cyclical poverty of Dalits. According to Sharankumar Limbale, the avowed goal of literature written by Dalits is the "rebellion against the caste system" (Limbale, 2004: 32). Yet, as was argued earlier, the writing on caste by non-Dalit writers is usually condemned as incapable of initiating a far-reaching critique of untouchability and caste. Despite disclosing the failure of the Gandhian vision of building a just and untouchability-free society, *A Fine Balance* narrates the workings of the caste system in a descriptive way, without interrogating its discriminatory and denigrating features. Although the novel represents Dalit figures as debased and deadened on account of their century-long discrimination, the caste system is neither attacked nor condemned conspicuously.

As for *The God of Small Things*, Velutha's is not the central perspective in the novel, as most of it is narrated from the point of view of upper-caste characters, such as Rahel. Thus, the focalisation of the narrative allows a perspective on Velutha, rather than from him. Maryam Mirza explains that "Until recently, subaltern characters in general and domestic servants in particular were often invisible or secondary in Indian […] fiction, with few detailed literary depictions of relationships between members of polarized classes" (Mirza, 2016: xv) —a symptom of Dalits' societal invisibility and powerlessness. In this case, a melodramatically sympathetic representation of Velutha draws the readers' attention. But apart from being pitied, he remains an apparently minor figure that watches from the edge of life, blocked from any revolutionary intention that might arise in him.

Subaltern Project

Parallel to the literature of pity that emerged among upper-caste Indian writers, the Subaltern Studies movement developed in the 1970s and 1980s along the line of 'history from below', that is, as an attempt to do a deconstructive reading of the 'un-historical' and elitist

historiography of both colonialism and nationalism,[140] and to deflate the myths and paradigms of the history of dominance and control; to reverse, in short, historical discourse by investing hegemony in the subaltern. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that Subaltern Studies' alternative way of (re)presenting the stories of the marginalised into the mainstream should be regarded as an important theoretical route to recuperate emancipatory struggles, such as that of Dalits. Undoubtedly, the Subaltern scholars' interrogation of mainstream knowledge systems and their representation of minority histories through ethical and moral parameters has resulted in the methodological and epistemological questioning of writing history in the South Asian context (Chakrabarty, 2007). The 1980s is thus a turning point in Indian history, as new epistemological positions, corresponding to the struggles of women, Adivasis, and Dalits, have been brought forth. These new positions have emphasised the need to understand the experiences and lives of the dominated people who leave few written records, whose voices are difficult to hear, and whose actions appear inconsequential.

Yet, Subaltern Studies tell some stories and forget others. Some of these forgotten stories are forgotten largely because of the hegemonic element lingering in this project. In recovering subaltern subjects, such a postcolonial project 're-commits' acts of violence against the subaltern by eliding differences and speaking for them from a hegemonic standpoint. The dangers of such hegemonic appropriation or occlusion are considerably increased in a multicultural and multilingual society like India, where the existence of different marked layers between the subaltern themselves influences the agency and voice granted. In the Subaltern Studies project the subaltern is often an unmarked subject, and specific issues —such as caste inequity— are not core features of its cultural and political formation. As Tabish Khair argues, a person whose conception of himself is framed within hegemonic discourses will find himself not free, but alienated, when having to tailor the forms of his activities or discourses. The greater the discursive incompatibility or conflict, the greater the individual's feeling of alienation (Khair, 2001: 27). Scholars such as Sumit Sarkar attribute the decline of Subaltern Studies to this tendency towards essentialising the categories of 'subaltern', in the sense of assigning to it more or less absolute, fixed, de-contextualised meanings and qualities (Sarkar,

[140] Sceptical about the established orthodoxies of both liberal nationalist and Marxist historiographies, writing history from a subaltern point of view intended to demonstrate that neither nationalist nor left progressive historiography had a place for autonomous historical actions of the subaltern. From the nationalist standpoint, on the one hand, the agenda of subaltern historiography seemed to run entirely against the narrative of historical emergence of a unified nation-state. On the other, the progressive left considered that the subaltern approach implicitly rejected the role of an advanced and revolutionary bourgeois and intellectual vanguard (Guha, 1988).

1997). Limbale sustains that even a radical critic such as Gayatri Spivak has based her entire exploration of the lives and experiences of the subalternity of Adivasis and Dalits on the writings of upper-caste writers, such as Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (Limbale, 2004: 8-9). However, Dalit problems do not disappear, nor can they be adequately approached through a simple substitution of 'class' and 'caste' by 'subaltern'.

Taking a cue from the Subaltern project, in the post-independence context some upper-caste writers slightly changed their style in portraying Dalit characters and equipped them with a new feature: agency. Such is the case of *Serious Men* (2010) by Manu Joseph. Joseph deploys realism but he combines it with satire in his representation of the cynical truth of contemporary India. It is precisely his use of satire that gives authority back to the Dalit figure. His protagonist, Ayyan Mani —a second-generation middle-class Dalit— is empowered despite his oppressed position and refuses to be silenced. Unlike previous upper-caste writers, Joseph endows Dalits with an active voice:

> Across the city there were protests […]. Later in the evening, outside the Bombay hospital, mobs paraded an effigy that was named after Nambodri. They beat it with slippers and finally burnt it. There were reports of stray violence in other parts of the country but after two days the riots receded. (Joseph, 2010: 308)

These riots show a certain unity among the Dalit community, a new strength gathered around their identity. This new Dalit that Joseph depicts does not need to be saved by any Gandhian figure, nor does he need to be pitied by upper-caste readers. Ayyan Mani is depicted as an active participant in his own future, willing to stand up for himself, and fight.

Similarly, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Road* (1961) tackles the Dalit plight, but the new-generation protagonist, unlike his fictional predecessor Bakha, is neither vulnerable nor irresolute. Set in a north Indian village, *The Road* displays the unequal love between Bhikhu, a strong, defiant and aggressive Dalit young man, and Rukmani, the young daughter of the "Dumpling-Nose Lambardar" of the village. In this text, Anand shows a more conscious Dalit figure, as Bhikhu refuses to be given water in a brass cup and requests a fairer treatment from the higher castes, for which he is brutally attacked later on. In trying to be more realistic in his approach this time, the author chooses an escapist route of anonymity for his protagonist, as Bhikhu

ultimately decides to leave the village and migrate to Delhi, "where no one knew who he was and where there would be no caste or outcaste" (Anand, 1961: 96).

Stepping out of one's own socio-economic and discursive space in order to narrate is, without doubt, a challenging task. However, this can be done, at least partly. Judith Butler argues that the lives of the Other within society can be recognised through processes of apprehension or recognition. Butler (2016) identifies apprehension as only sensing the Other, a sort of perception without complete knowledge; a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, and may never be so. Recognition, on the other hand, is a much profound process of cognition, where marginalised lives get 'regarded'. Anand's *The Road* and Joseph's *Serious Men* testify to Butler's description of apprehension, as both writers are able to apprehend the lives that are pushed to precarity; they both depict non-normative and marginalised identities that fall within the borders of society, and they both attempt to grant them a (partial) voice.

However, despite the authors' ability to apprehend, their epistemological inability to fully recognise these characters gets in the way of the latter having any autonomy over their voices, struggles or lives, as the perspective in both novels is still 'from above'. Anand and Joseph speak about Dalits' vulnerabilities as though these provide them with some sort of protection against violence, discrimination or rigid norms of behaviour. But, in reality, Dalits' visibility is usually contingent upon their proximity to the centre. Thus, the resistance portrayed in both texts seems to come to relevance only when it appeals to the centre, which underscores the difference between apprehension and recognition. Therefore, so long as the limited and exclusionary epistemology remains standing, certain lives will remain open to 'injurability', stay low in the ladder of 'grievability', and continue to be lived in 'precarity' (Butler, 2016).

Discursive Alienation

Undoubtedly, the subject matter of a text influences its aesthetics. In the same vein, dealing with caste issues affects the narrative style and determines the choice of literary devices in a text. Furthermore, in the context of a highly class/caste-conscious society such as the Indian, the class and caste origin of the writer impinges upon the literature created. As Tabish Khair puts it, "I do not wish to imply that the mere fact of belonging to a social class precludes the possibility of transcending the boundaries of that class or that material economic factors

directly and solely determine cultural representations" (Khair, 2001: 22), but they certainly have an effect on them. As such, texts produced by upper castes about Dalits convey their sympathy through certain literary and rhetorical devices, often framed in a condescending and patronising tone.

The dilemma, then, for most upper-caste writers dealing with caste issues is how to write without appropriating from a position of power or occluding realities. In the case of Anand, his well-meaning attacks on casteism are limited and superficial, and the Dalit alienation he portrays is actually static. He seeks to overcome casteist oppression by prompting a change in ideal factors or a mere material change, instead of addressing its dynamic mechanism as arising from deep social and economic anomalies. According to Khair, in a postcolonial society such as India, the past is experienced not only as discursively separate from the present but also, often, as discursively opposed to it (323). Yet, texts such as Anand's tend to present a foreshortening or a shrinkage of time, thus marking a coalition of India and Indian realities. Likewise, the 'tomorrow' with which *The God of Small Things* ends is a 'tomorrow' that has already been foretold and marked the destruction of the lovers. In this sense, the 'tomorrow' is not linear but cyclic, a 'backward-looking tomorrow' that turns out to be a repetition of the past. In the same vein, Mistry's protagonists —the two Dalits and the two upper-caste characters— toil in an India filled with largely static images and repeated stories of oppression. Such narrative repetitions of the past conceal the existing and changed structures of caste-based oppression, such as the transition from physical domination to mostly cultural and economic hegemonies. The perception of the past as 'eternally present' not only discredits the developments achieved by Dalits through struggle, but also ends up wrongly mapping Dalits' experiences and responses. This creates a sort of eternal 'epic of the victim' that, implicitly or explicitly, refuses to register the feasibility of Dalit resistance.

This tendency often goes hand in hand with a coalition of space which denies the existing distance between differing social and caste positions. In their attempt to distance themselves from casteist discourses, texts such as *A Fine Balance* or *The God of Small Things* forcibly coalesce obvious separate territories of upper castes and Dalits. Mistry's main protagonists would not share the same space for so long, nor would they be able to hold an extended or intellectual conversation with each other in real life, due to the widely separated socio-economic spaces that they are bound to occupy. Instead of contributing to the elucidation of casteist issues and the comprehension of their outcomes, this easy conflation actually obscures

the hegemonic structures of power which, precisely, prevent figures such as these from sharing a space in real life. Moreover, such blending of territories also adds to the symbolic repetition of oppression —same images, stories and incidents— thus dismissing the considerable gains obtained in India over the fifty years of Independence. These literary devices corroborate the upper-caste perspective of these texts as, however sympathetic, these writers do not experience the life and the changes that Dalits do, and are not fully aware of them. In fact, they may easily see Indian space as a mere repetition of the same patterns, thus interpreting space and time as largely immobile.

Another aspect upper-caste writers fail to avoid appropriating with regard to Dalits is precisely the representation of their voices. Language is the medium through which socio-cultural structures and relations are accessed and reproduced. But language is always socially framed, institutionally located, and affected by temporality. Echoing Khair, "discourses are neither free-floating nor neutral" (Khair, 2001: 262). Most texts produced by upper castes on Dalits have been written in English, as most of these writers are Anglophone and aspire to reach a wide national and international reading public. However, the use of English in this context does not escape scrutiny and controversy. While forty per cent of the population of India knows Hindi, at the most five per cent can be said to know English (Khair, 2001), and Dalits —and most low castes in India— were not English speakers at that time. Consequently, their literary portrayal through the use of English risks authenticity.

English as a medium of expression has often been considered to be a barrier against real insights and depictions of Indian circumstances. Employing English would not only be discursively alienating across the upper-lower caste divide, but it would also be an artistically and ontologically negative factor, if the intention is to create an authentic Indian dialogue (Khair, 2001: 51). The Indian English text is linguistically inclined to exclude non-English-speaking figures or to include them only in translations or paraphrases. Representing them, or registering their agency in a language that is seldom, if ever, employed by them —and never from choice in an ordinary situation— is, indeed, problematic. As Parsa Venkateshwar Rao puts it,

> English writing in India will always remain a problematic issue. Whether we like it or not, it will invariably carry symptoms of cultural schizophrenia. It is part of the colonial legacy which cannot be wished away. We can only come to terms with it. (Rao qtd. in Khair, 2001: 99)

In an attempt to mimic authenticity, upper-caste writers have often resorted to crafting the use of English in low-caste characters. They have 'Indianised' it through a sort of pidgin Indian English which turns literal translation into a type of artistic echo-language that sounds 'un-English' and Indian, while remaining English and not being literally Indian (Khair, 2001: 100).[141] Authors have tried to recreate Indian language patterns through a special rhythm and syntax, and by means of combining Indian words and literally translated phrases with English. Their purpose was to create an illusion of transcribing authentic Indian experiences (Muthiah, 2009: 2). But 'translating' multicultural and multilingual realities into English is challenging, and inevitably raises questions regarding the legitimacy and accuracy of dialogue and its agenda. As is the case with most translations, English is limited in its depiction of Indian cultural diversity and, hence, characters and themes lose some of their impact when translated. Moreover, by attempting to accommodate Indian linguistic patterns into English, writers end up creating transcriptions that often sound childish, even intellectually limited. Khair sustains that this superimposition of elements from an alien discursive worldview over, and at the cost of, existing elements of the world purportedly being viewed, is often a cannibalistic act of devouring the subaltern world (Khair, 2001: 117). Thus, artificiality and the appropriation of discourse are inevitable.

In order to escape them, another strategy that upper-caste writers resort to is the use of 'incorrect English' so as to 'replicate' the discourse attributed to non-English-speaking low castes. This staged incorrect English is largely manufactured with the help of literal translations from Hindu, occasional exclamations and intermingling of articles, and other similar grammatical errors (115). However, where this grammatically incorrect English is used to accurately 'translate' Dalits' speech, it often has the effect of further accentuating their social inferiority. As Khair has warned, "The ploy of creating a stylized Indian English remains suspect and actually replicates the staged English of colonial literatures […]. One is faced with the problem of superior reportage, of appropriation from a position of domination" (125).

Rohinton Mistry also uses a crafted language so as to stage Dalits' use of English. In his narrative, the extensive and complex discussions that educated, westernised and upper-caste

[141] The 'Indianised' English, usually attributed to non-English-speaking and lower-castes Indians in Anglophone literature, is a strictly poetic idiom (Guilhamon, 2009: 226).

Dina and Maneck carry out with the rural and low-caste Ishwar and Omprakash would have been impossible in real life, as they lack a common language through which they can communicate to the extent depicted by Mistry. The 'common language' that Mistry has manufactured inevitably reduces the authenticity and autonomy of the low castes, as that language clearly does not belong to them, but to the dominant social group. Moreover, the agency that both Ishwar and Omprakash demonstrate would have been inconceivable without stylising their language.

In Roy's text, Velutha supposedly communicates with Ammu and the twins in Malayalam, and the dialogue is subsequently 'translated' into standard English.[142] The following passage is an example of the English used by Roy to narrate Velutha's exchanges with the twins:

> 'I don't want you playing any silly games on this river.' 'We won't. We promise. We'll use it only when you're with us.' 'First we'll have to find the leaks ...' Velutha said. 'Then we'll have to plug them!' the twins shouted, as though it was the second line of a well-known poem. 'How long will it take?' 'A day', said Velutha. 'A day! I thought you'd say a month!' (Roy, 1997: 213)

Roy chooses to report Velutha's direct and indirect speech in standard English, devoid of grammatical errors and other distractions. This lends his ideas and words a certain dignity, and contributes to the reader's perception of Velutha not just as a Dalit, but rather as a person who is capable of coherent thought. However, as Christine Vogt-William (2003) admits, as a Dalit, Velutha would not have had access to the kind of English Roy uses in his speech. In the absence of Dalit discourses from within, this 'superior reportage' inevitably contributes to the repetition of occlusion and dominance. In short, in the Indian context, the use of English contributes, in a way, to sealing lower castes' alienation and perpetuating their exclusion from literature.

Undeniably, literature facilitates the production, reinforcement and expansion of cultural recognition, and has the potential to draw the reader's attention to voices and lives that remain unrecognised due to the limiting frames they inhabit. But, existing within the normative frames

[142] The term 'standard' English refers, in this context, to a variety of English that is close to standard British or American English with respect to syntax and grammar, even if it bears certain obvious lexical markers of 'Indian' socio-cultural realities.

of recognition, these voices and lives are bound to be limited by their own ontology, not being recognised as lives in their entirety. As Gaurav Somwanshi contends,

> The savarnas can afford to turn a blind eye to their privilege and their known and unknown participation in exploitation and oppression. For the savarnas this could even be a fancy subject to sound more progressive, or an exotic ideology that feeds their curiosity, or just another topic to write an essay on or something to build their careers around. But for us Dalits, the battle against caste is not some ideology, it is our existence. (Somwanshi, 2014; web page)

In the writings by upper-castes writers, Dalits have been stamped with a constitutive Otherness, have been constructed as passive, non-participating, and non-autonomous. Yet, despite their inadequacy, these representations created a resonance that shook the foundation of the societal stereotyped ideology, and catalysed a rethinking of the problem of India's subalterns; most importantly, they served as a precursor to the emergence of a new genre: Dalit writing.

From Containment to Assertion

Initial stages

As Tabish Khair rightfully argues, while some discourse and ideologies have become hegemonic, no discourse or ideology can be omnipotent. There is always a struggle for power, a conflict of discourses and, more significantly, for any discourse there is a counter-discourse (Khair, 2001: 347). In Dalits' case, the outsider's perspective was necessary and important as long as there was no insider's perspective. In the presence of an internal perspective the monopoly of the former is certainly challenged. Throughout the 20th century, a variety of factors loosened the stranglehold of Brahminism and this doubtlessly contributed to a shift in the Dalits' mindset: the impact of colonialism, the establishment of a public education system in India, the advent of industrial capitalism, the rise of an Indian working class, contact with the ideas of the Enlightenment, and a nationalist anti-colonial movement, all contributed to elasticising the access to culture. More importantly, Dalits themselves were no longer silent

occupants of the liminal space to which they had been confined for centuries; leaders like Phule and Ambedkar organised them into a force.

Towards the end of the first half of the 20th century, there was a growing need to re-appropriate, re-think, and re-formulate historical experience among India's disenfranchised. Dalits progressively felt that a revision of history was imperative, and their side-narrative needed to be re-explored. As Saïd contends, "If you feel you have been denied the chance to speak your piece, you will try extremely hard to get that chance. For indeed, the subaltern *can* speak" (Saïd, 2003: 335; emphasis in the original). It was commonly assumed that, devoid of literacy and publication, Dalits were essentially linked to the oral tradition. Yet, the history of Dalit writers stretches back more than 500 years, before the transformative politics of Ambedkar gave birth to modern anti-caste Dalit social and political ideology. Mystical devotionalism, also known as the *bhakti* movement —which played such an important role in the Indian literary realm of the 15th and 16th centuries— consisted of mainly upper-caste Brahmin writers, also known as sant-poets. Nonetheless, some low-caste writers also managed to make a space for themselves.

One of the most famous Dalit sant-poets, and by far the most revered among Dalits, was Guru Ravidass (1450-1540). What made Ravidass the most popular sant-poet in northern India was his fight against untouchability and his frequent dispute with the Brahmin pundits, who considered his *bhakti* as a prototype of revolt against the centuries-old casteist hegemony (Prasad & Dahiwale, 2005: 250). Though he attired himself like an upper caste, he deliberately disclosed his low-caste identity and continued with his 'degrading' hereditary occupation of making and mending shoes. By imitating Brahminical iconography, he wanted to prove that lower castes could assert their separate and collective Dalit identity by challenging upper-caste social superiority, without compromising their hereditary low-caste occupations or converting to any other religion. He expressed his *bhakti* in the form of radical poetry, graphically exposing the atrocious treatment received by Dalits at the hands of upper castes. Basing himself on moral principles of compassion and dignity of labour, he aimed at reflecting the democratic and egalitarian tenets of pre-Aryan cultural heritage, and instilling a sort of social protest into the low castes, albeit through peaceful means (Bellwinkel-Schempp, 2007). Kabir (1440-1518), another Dalit sant-poet, was considered to be one of the initial figures of the Dalit tradition. Unlike Brahmin sant-poets, he did not write in the high languages of Indian society,

but opted for the vernacular ones of the common people so as to accurately represent them and be truthful to his origins (Limbale, 2004: 4).

Outside devotional literature, Swami Achhutanand (1879-1933) was the most prominent pre-independence Dalit literary icon, and assumed his name from the Hindi word for untouchable *achhut* (Brueck, 2014: 71). Surprisingly enough, he is rarely referred to as a 'Dalit writer', as his writings have been accused of lacking Ambedkarite principles of political liberation, renunciation of Hindu identity, and caste eradication. The first entry of a Dalit in the print world was the publication of a poem composed by another Dalit, Heera Dom (1885-unknown), entitled *Achut Kee Shikayat* ("The Complaint of the Untouchable") in *Saraswati*, in 1914. It was the first description of Dalit alienation and subordination, governed, as it was, by the strict Brahminical laws of that time (Dom qtd. in Narayan & Misra, 2004: 16).

But while the sant-poets and folk culture writers previously mentioned were revolutionary in their social protest, none of their work actually envisioned a disintegration of caste altogether. They have been accused of searching for social equality within a religious framework rather than a secular one. They evince, thus, that not all low-caste narratives sought to circumvent power and injustice. Some fomented social 'quietism' instead, thus participating in the perpetuation of doctrinarian and casteist stereotypes. Probably the most adequate explanation for this is that the whole process of interpretation and maintenance of literary records was in the hands of upper-caste —Brahmin— men. Consequently, such casteist interpolations tended to overemphasise the role of upper-caste sants while relegating the rest to the margins.

Still, although largely contained, Badri Narayan and A. R. Misra insist that *bhakti* poets created an ideological basis for the development of a Dalit consciousness, and an alternative ontological paradigm of liberation, especially in the northern part of the country (Narayan & Misra, 2004). As Zelliot has noted, "we cannot but help entertain ideas about bhakti in the modern world — the bhakti poets as moralists, as crusaders against casteism and evil, as agents of change" (Zelliot, 1987: 105). It is indisputable that they were militant figures of their time, despite the fact that the particularity of the experience they were writing about, as well as the space they were writing from, were not fully acknowledged and they ended up being normalised into mainstream of Brahminical literature.

Dalit literature has slowly established its own tradition with anti-caste Dalit thinkers like Ravidass, Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar as its signposts.[143] However, the first half of the 20th century constituted its backbone. The spread of education and the intensification of the Dalit movement motivated Dalit youth to express their aversion for, and anger against, the established unequal social system in their writing. Ambedkar claimed the following about Dalit writing:

> We do not know of any weapon more effective than this social boycott which could have been invented for the suppression of the Untouchables. The method of open violence pales away before it, for it has the most far reaching and deadening effects. It is the more dangerous because it passes as a lawful method consistent with the theory of freedom of contract. (Ambedkar, 2017: 192-93)

Ambedkar's questioning of institutionalised discrimination was a call to define dignity as the resistance to such discrimination against Dalits. As Pramod Nayar contends, "Dignity, if it hinges upon mobility and a lack-of-fit into existing differentiation, is then an assertion of agential dignity" (Nayar, 2017: 8). The establishment of Ambedkar as the leader of the Dalits converted Ambedkarite ideology in the true inspiration for the emerging body of Dalit literature.[144] An earlier generation of Dalit writers who had participated in Ambedkar's movement —Shantabai Dani, Vasant Moon, and Narendra Jadhav— recalls the social and political upheavals between the 1920s and 1950s as consonant with new forms of self-making. Their accounts are closely tied to Ambedkar's movement; held together by his name, they conflated self and community. Ambedkar is often a character in these narratives who enables a profound transformation of the Dalit community by inaugurating a historic struggle for self-

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[143] The first conference of Dalit writers was held in the state of Bengal, in March, 1958. The first discussion on what and how Dalit literature should be took place in 1967, in Milind College. With Ambedkar's demise, splits developed among Dalit writers, just as they did in the Dalit movement. The term 'Dalit' was not accepted by many writers and thus many alternatives were projected to name this literature of protest. In order that Buddhism could expand among Dalits, promoters of the Buddhist worldview proposed 'neo-Buddhist literature' as its name, arguing that the majority of them had become Buddhist. Several Dalit critics rejected this out of concern that the movement would become communist and stray from the Ambedkarite path, and insisted that what they were writing as Dalits —the history they described— was concerned with the incidents that were related to casteism rather than Buddhism. Thus, they proposed 'Ambedkarite literature', 'Non-Brahmin literature', or 'Bahujan Sahitya' as its label. Some others suggested calling it 'revolt literature', although 'Dalit literature' turned out to be the most compelling term (Limbale, 2004: 58, 150).

[144] The practice of uttering 'Jai Bhim' when Dalits greet each other symbolises this inspirational role. The phrase is a paean to Ambedkar and reveals the political mindset of the protagonist (Limbale, 2004: 46).

respect and the social recognition of a stigmatised and degraded community. His name accumulates some sort of fetish value; it is repeated, circulated, and made to represent the man, the movement, and the Dalit future. Tracing the origin of Dalit literature back to Ambedkar, Dalit writer-activist Arjun Dangle asserts: "Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality" (Dangle, 1994: vii-viii). In other words, Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness, whose speaking subject is the erstwhile 'untouchable Other' of casteist society, and whose central concern is how best to represent his/her authentic experience. The importance of Ambedkar was such that Namdeo Dhasal wrote in the 1970s: "You gave us the tongue" (Dhasal qtd. in Zelliot, 2005: 313).

Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A memoir* (2005) —a tribute to Jadhav's parents, particularly his father— offers an examination of the caste system in contemporary India and traces the story of the awakening of Dalits by traversing three generations. The text has been written at times from the perspective of Jadhav's parents, Damu and Sonu, and some others from his own. But *Outcaste* is not only a personal recounting of the downside of the caste divide in India; it also examines Dalits' enlightenment as spearheaded by Ambedkar, the Independence movement, and the civil disobedience movement. The Dalit movement in colonial Maharashtra was a significant social process that shaped Damu's identity as a Dalit and a neo-Buddhist. Vivid descriptions of Dalit struggles fill the narrative, such as the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, the Nashik Kalaram Temple Entry Movement in 1930, the establishment of the Independent Labour Party in 1937, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, and Ambedkar's death in 1956. An entire section titled "The Struggle" is also devoted to the Ambedkar-led Dalit struggle and the involvement in it of ordinary Dalits, like Damu and Sonu. Ambedkar appears as a character in the text, both as a historical figure and a symbol of Dalit assertion. Damu recollects:

> When Babasaheb spoke, everyone listened. He urged the untouchables to rebel against the humiliating and enslaving traditions of village duties. 'It is utterly disgraceful to sell your human rights for a few crumbs of bread', he said. 'We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect and gain self-knowledge', Babasaheb said. (Jadhav, 2005: 37)

Damu attributes his assertive and rebellious nature to Ambedkar, stating that he inculcated 'the flame of dignity' and self-respect in him during the Mahad Satyagraha: "The movement inspired by Babasaheb Ambedkar had fully seeped into me. I was now imbued with new courage and self-realization. It had given me the power to question, reason and act" (25). Thus, the spirit of self-realisation is considered as one of the most important contributions of the Ambedkarite movement.

This emerging —yet still marginalised— genre sought to convey the suffering, protest and hopes of the Dalit community in India. But, with the history of their literary exclusion in mind, most of them sought to imitate mainstream Indian writing in form and content. Bernard Cohn (1971) argues that Dalits have adapted and learned that it is not beneficial to directly challenge the existing hegemony from the outside. Instead, they reckoned that it was to their benefit to work within the boundaries that have been framed for them by those who have been empowered with the authority to do so. The fact that they continued to play by upper-caste rules, and emulated hegemonic patterns precisely to avoid being excluded from 'standard' canonical writing and critical attention, resulted in their assimilation by hegemonic literature. As Susie Tharu has pointed out, Dalit writings

> [a]re always at risk of being redirected, especially by well-wishers, into familiar formations such as 'suffering humanity', 'literary classic' 'postcolonial, identity politics', and so on. What they lose in the journey is the baggage that comprise the very condition of their emergence and affirmation. It is this baggage that gives form and value to the memories they retrieve, the locations, experiences and relationships that they direct us to, the arguments that they extend, and most importantly, to the new figure of wrong: oppressed, broken, angry, but trailing new interests, new meanings of morality that is being creatively and conceptually elaborated. (Tharu qtd. in Mukherjee, 2018: 147)

Thus, the journey from a negative literary consciousness among Dalits to a fully grown Dalit literary consciousness has passed through the process of Sanskritisation, a cognitive condition that laid the foundation for a more mature literary and transformative consciousness to come.

Protest Literature

In the second half of the 20th century there was a growing impulse to overturn old certainties and reject the supposed homogeneity in favour of ‘difference’. Around this period, postmodernists argued that there are no fixed categories, nor ‘total’ or ‘essential’ identities; similarly, language does not necessarily reflect reality, and universal or official discourses are far from being transparent accounts. Instead, they asserted that identities are discursively ‘constructed’, that truth is relative, and ideologies systematically shape narrative representations, which culminates in ‘cultural relativism’. Accordingly, history is not a neutral given, but a biased construction. The postmodernist theorist Linda Hutcheon claimed that “facts are events to which we have given meaning”, and added that “different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events” (Hutcheon, 1988: 57). The fact that distinct outlooks and interpretations can be given for the same episodes does not downplay the meaning or value of these narratives. Dolores Herrero contends that this reinforces the idea that truth is never monolithic, and contributes to a more comprehensive delineation of a multifaceted reality (Herrero, 2019). In the same vein, Arthur Marwick acknowledges that “History means not the past but the study of past” (Marwick qtd. in Gaur, 1998: 9), thus underscoring the element of ‘interpretation’ in historical narratives. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss (1967) emphasised the process of ‘constitution’ and ‘reconstitution’ of historical facts so as to ‘add’ meaning to them, while Northrop Frye (2000 [1957]) argued that ‘emplotment’ plays a crucial role in structuring a historical narrative. All this implies that writing history is not only done with certain objectives in mind, but also for a specific audience.

The conviction that they have been left out of mainstream Indian discourse, and that their side of the history has been systematically erased or distorted, prompted contemporary Dalits to speak their truth. In doing so, Dalits have adapted the strategies of the very structures of oppression to bring about the liberation that they longed for, using memory as a counterpoint to history. The awareness of a wronged past is what Paolo Freire labelled ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’, explaining that when a subaltern or disenfranchised community becomes cognizant of the fact that options or choices formerly beyond their control are now available to them, and a dialogue on issues of oppression is stirred, they attain sensitisation (Freire, 1970). In the case of Dalits, the 20th century was the period in which their sensitisation took form as they felt the urge to re-script the historical and social discourse.

Memory and social justice have slowly captured the Indian scenario of political culture. Acknowledging the role of literature in deciding whose predicament really matters (Morris, 1996), Dalits saw it as a great tool for their cause and a corrective space for contemporary Dalit identity construction. They started using it to subvert and counter the ideological and cultural framework erected by the dominant power group, and to tailor their own agenda of exposing the 'misdeeds' of the past and constructing a new Dalit consciousness.

Like pre-modern low-caste writers, contemporary Dalit writers envisioned the necessity of socio-political change, and regarded literature as a tool to achieve much more than simply vague other-worldly consolations. Yet, unlike pre-modern writers, contemporary Dalit ones wrote differently. As Sharankumar Limbale explains, the difference is not just a temporal one; it is also the result of the cultural transformations that have taken place (Limbale, 2004). While the older generation was prepared "to call on society's goodwill and to collaborate with the ruling power of the day", the present generation has attained confidence and is ready to assert itself (16). He calls this a new rebel tradition in which Dalit writers write out of social responsibility.

Regarding the presupposed neutrality of the writer in modernist literature as a simple uncommitted witness, Limbale upholds that a Dalit writer cannot be neutral. He argues that neutrality is only possible when there is no relationship between the writer and the experience narrated, when experiences are the result of the imagination. In Dalit literature, however, writers narrate their own experiences, which means that they cannot simply record or report; they have to engage in action. This turns them into writer-activists who regard literature as part of a social movement (36). Another difference between first-generation Dalit writers and the contemporary ones is the latter's defiance of form. While the first generation imitated the elitist language and narrative technique and did not go beyond the established canon, the new generation have radicalised their writing in a sort of cultural assertion from below. They have modified their writing for a dual purpose, what Gopal Guru calls the double task "of tackling the Dalit literary establishment, on the one hand, and colonizing the state, on the other" (Guru, 2001a: 192).

Moreover, in its initial stages Dalit literature was far from being a unified literary corpus. Several different regional 'sprouts' germinated at different periods and employed various regional languages, but their ideological programmes —although met with public indifference

and political apathy—[145] coincided. However, the forging of a Dalit political category and identity coincided with the emergence of a pan-Indian Dalit writing phenomenon, spreading out from the regional level to the national one, and whose heterogeneity and 'plurivocality' united in a concrete agenda and defined its contours more sharply. Translations also played a crucial role in ascribing Dalit literature the feature and importance of a literary movement, thus partaking in its national and international accessibility, reception and dissemination (Brueck, 2014). As Limbale argues, translation indicates not only a linguistic process, but also a transfer between contexts, from personal atrocity to a global readership.[146]

Social movements unequivocally shaped Indian literature in the 20th century, but the 1970s signified a tangible change for the Dalit community. Disparate Dalit voices and discourses jointly critiqued the homogenised version of India and exposed its fissures, and the problem of Dalit selfhood was staged as a problem of literary self-representation. As the Dalit writer Ajay Navaria puts it, "if you don't give us entry into your power structure, we will set up a parallel power structure of our own" (Navaria, 2018; web page). Modern Dalit literature as a unified corpus and separate category was consolidated with the formation of the Marathi activist-poet organisation known as the Dalit Panthers. These writers deployed the language of rights, social equality, and affirmative action to challenge upper castes' refusal to discuss issues related to caste inequalities. From the mid-1970s, Dalit angst, protest and alternative vision started to be shown in Dalit literature, and the mainstream press and journals slowly began to grant space to critical writings on caste and Dalit politics owing to the pressure exerted by Dalit mobilisation (Satyanarayana, 2012). It can be assumed, thus, that modern Dalit literature is both the product and the vehicle of the Dalit movement, as they have grown out of the same consciousness: "Dalit literature is inconceivable without a 'Dalit movement'; the literary project has long been

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[145] During Gandhi's time, there was a rise of sympathisers in the state of Gujarat who wanted to 'assimilate' Dalits to the mainstream Hindu society by what they called 'the change of Hindu heart'. But Dalit writings had already turned towards Ambedkar and his ideas, and were ready to reject shallow Gandhian sympathy. The emerging Marathi Dalit literature coincided with the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, particularly the one led by Ambedkar. Unlike Marathi Dalit literature, Hindi Dalit literature was deprived, in the beginning, of the influence of Ambedkar due to the 'divide and rule' policy of the Congress Party. Therefore, north Indian Dalit leaders lacked the necessary vision and courage to challenge caste, as Ambedkar did. Tamil Dalit literature is, however, a recent phenomenon. Dalit writers in Tamil Nadu were influenced by the thinking of E. V. Ramasami Naicker —popularly known as Periyar— and his Self-Respect movement which started in 1932 and scathingly attacked the existing social systems of religion, caste and gender, articulating a rationalistic world-view which would pave the way for a radical change in the social order (Kandasamy, 2006a).

[146] Nevertheless, many layered pathos, anger, protest, and memories of injustice may be lost in the process of translation. When Limbale describes the way in which Mini Krishnan, the editor at Oxford University Press, 'struggled' with his writing, he refers to the process of 'translating his personal narrative' into another kind of discourse (Limbale, 2005: x).

read as a vehicle for, or transmission of, a larger political project, a form of cultural activism" (Gajarawala, 2013: 2).

Inextricably linked to Dalits' social state of affairs, Limbale defines Dalit literature as that "which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief" (Limbale, 2004: 30). In the same vein, Dalit writer B. M. Puttaiah describes it as "the literature that captures the desire, dreams, belief, agony, suffering, violence, humiliation, impatience, dissatisfaction, rage and resistance of Dalits" (Puttaiah, 2013: 355). Rameshchandra Parmar, President of the Gujarat Dalit Panthers and editor of *Panther* and *Akrosh* magazines, views it as "that which provides a platform for the formation of casteless and classless society. It is also necessary that it should also give expression to the exploitation and injustice of the world" (Parmar qtd. in Patel, 2011: 4). Scholar Toral Gajarawala characterises it "as a literature of protest and historical revisionism, typically with an emphasis on the documentation of the violence, oppression and structural inequality engendered by casteism" (Gajarawala, 2013: 2-3), while Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki ascribes to it an impact at cultural and social levels stating that "is not just a literary movement. It is also a cultural and social movement. […] the portrayal of the wishes and aspirations of these oppressed and tormented Dalits" (Valmiki, 2003: xxxiii). All these definitions point to a singular political imperative behind Dalit literature: to render it a 'literature of action'.

Limbale adds that by Dalit literature he means "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale, 2004: 19), thus highlighting the fact that in many of these works there is an argument for a single consciousness that informs the narrative production and serves as a gauge for authenticity. This consciousness is widely known as Dalit *chetna*, and has progressively become a fundamental component and a theoretical tool for setting the boundaries of this growing genre. Although a fixed or universal definition of Dalit *chetna* does not exist, it is largely agreed upon that it consists in a reflection of the Ambedkarite ideology, including a rejection of the caste system and the Hindu law, and some general embracing of rationalism and social equality. Limbale defines Dalit consciousness as a "revolutionary mentality connected with struggle" and inspired by Ambedkarite thought, whose aim is to "make slaves conscious of their slavery" (32). Omprakash Valmiki writes: "Dalit consciousness is deeply concerned with the question, 'Who am I? What is my identity?' The strength of character of Dalit authors comes from these questions" (Valmiki, 2001: 28-9).

Another fundamental ingredient of Dalit *chetna* is the authenticity and realism in the portrayal of Dalit characters. Valmiki emphasises the importance of writing "the truth as one has experienced it, depicted just as it was seen and felt", for "pretension is impossible in a literal rendering" (Valmiki qtd. in Brueck, 2014: 65-6). It is, thus, Dalit experience rendered realistically and honourably:

> The Dalit character has to be fully cognizant of the religious and political origins of his/her exploited social status, and rather than succumbing to acceptance, he is enlivened by a desire to struggle for freedom, not just for himself, but for his whole community. The spirit of impassioned struggle for the collective good is regarded by Dalit writers as an ideal message. (Brueck, 2014: 48)

Dalit *chetna* has progressively turned into a kind of 'test' by which the 'Dalitness' of any work of literature —whether written by a Dalit or a non-Dalit— can be judged. As such, unlike literary works without Dalit consciousness, Laura Brueck argues that true Dalit writings "alternatively develop the possibility of 'personhood' for Dalit subjects […] by invest[ing them] with subjectivity and the power to resist, rebel, and change" (15). Yet, apart from being a much-needed strategic project of self-theorisation, Brueck also signals the fact that, in an effort to contain and define the political, social, and aesthetic attributes of Dalit literature, Dalit *chetna* has developed into an essentialist concept. She accuses it of becoming a rendering of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak qtd. in Brueck, 2014) in its battle for self-representation and authority, as well as in its demand for a literary space for Dalits. Dalit *chetna* has acquired the power to determine what authors and what texts may share that space, thus positing a singular idea of how Dalits should think and write, and how they should cultivate political and personal awareness.

Some critics defend this essentialism as a product of both narrative misrepresentation and the contaminated mentality and prejudice from readers. As Dalit writer Daya Pawar puts it, "Due to the mentality formed by different cultural categories, […] social life and world-views were divided. Because of the pressure of false morality, even the process of tasting a literary creation did not remain uncontaminated" (Pawar, 1987: 8). Limbale explains that, since Dalit literature did not have its own aesthetics, first-generation Dalit writers were forced to rely on mainstream ones, tailoring the beauty of their works in a way that was agreeable to the tastes of élite aesthetes. But instead of pleasure and beauty, Dalit literature is born out of pain and social

injustices, which must be prioritised over the entertainment of readers. The aesthetics of Dalit literature should rest on the artist's social commitment, and the ability to raise the reader's consciousness on fundamental values such as equality and justice, and transport him/her to the writer's level of experience (Limbale, 2004: 120). Therefore, given the importance of Dalit *chetna* in these writings, to appraise Dalit literature within the framework of pleasure aesthetics is, without doubt, inadequate.

In the post-independence period, strategic essentialism around Dalit literature was increasingly accentuated and the narrative of 'Dalithood' seemed to strengthen feelings of separateness and to sharpen notions of 'us' versus 'them'. Consequently, the emphasis on 'difference' became central to define Dalit identity. Ravi Shankar Kumar argues that the specificity created around Dalit literature has to be seen at two levels: by virtue of it being literature, and on account of the 'Dalitness' that contains, which emerges from the experience of social ostracism and stigma, which unequivocally adds to its distinctive character (Kumar, 2018: 53). This distinctiveness has inspired Dalit writers and critics to underscore the fact that Dalit literature's aesthetics does not correspond with the mainstream and traditional model, and it is certainly not in tune with the uncritical and homogeneous portrayal of Indian society. They argue that literature must change with changing culture, and it would be wrong to insist on fixed standards. They insist that Dalit literary articulation carves out a separate literary space, garnished with new aesthetics, closer to the experience and the language of the masses. Dalit writer B. Krishnappa has a blunter view of the politics of Dalit poetics. Arguing that classic aesthetics and artistic creativity are the luxury of "the satiated and the flabby", he asserts that Dalit literature has a different stand on creativity and literary excellence:

> Dalit literature is not the literature of those whose stomachs are full […], who consume antiacids to digest their food, who live in multi-storeyed buildings and commute only by car and airplane […]. For such people, literature is an aesthetic luxury, written to kill time. Protest literature is not written for this Tata-Birla five percent who lead a lavish life. Our engagement today is with the starving, the helpless, those who eat from the waste binds outside hotels, the homeless who live in railway stations, bus stands, those who steal food and clothing and die without history. (Krishnappa, 2013: 110)

Because of its intended public, it has to be “unadorned and fresh” as it is “inappropriate to look for refinement in a movement’s revolutionary literature” (109). In the same vein, Limbale asserts that Dalit literature’s objective is to make readers restless and angry, thus highlighting the inadequacy of beauty in this case (Limbale, 2004: 115).

Nevertheless, although Dalit literature is written primarily to raise awareness, and not for any aesthetic purpose as such, it cannot be reduced merely to an engagement with victimhood, nor to the mere denouncement of the mistreatments Dalits have been subjected to, and this does not imply that it lacks aesthetic merit altogether. Instead, these authors display new modes of literary and aesthetic imagination, challenging traditional criteria and practices, which is why a separate yardstick has often been requested. Satyanarayana, for instance, suggests that this emphasis on a distinct Dalit identity and experience actually works towards the shaping of a canon of Dalit literature (Satyanarayana, 2013a). Insisting on the contrast not only with pre-independence periods, but equally with “the clamorous staging of atrocity and the sociological idiom of caste that marks much pre-1990s writing about Dalits”, Satyanarayana and Tharu identify a new age of Dalit writing in a distinct poetics of critique and creativity (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011: 59). They point out the innovations in the forms of Dalit social and political thinking and the critical effect they have, precisely for “not follow[ing] the protocols of […] writing but tak[ing] their cue from literature’s more direct and promiscuous involvement with life” (59).

The demand of separate artistic standards is nevertheless problematic. Many critics, among them Dalits, ultimately assert that this demand could be detrimental to Dalit literature’s agenda. Limbale argues that to demand a different aesthetic for Dalit writing would seem like an attempt to create a separate province: “there is no justification for Dalit writers to develop a separate criticism. If their literature is great, it will stand any test, any time” (Limbale, 2004: 106). Moreover, marking texts as ‘Dalit’ problematises their reception. As Aniket Jaaware (2012) suggests, the discourse on victimhood delimits its politics, and a romantic notion of authenticity and identity delimits it further, preventing this politics from becoming generalisable. Therefore, the ‘Dalit’ label reinforces the identity attached to it but, at the same time, runs the risk of binding that identity and hindering any claim to the universal. As such, Dalit literature claims to be read and included as literature, yet demanding to be read in a special way.

This, according to Toral Gajarawala (2011), corresponds to the specific hermeneutical strategies that characterise Dalit literature as 'unreading' due to its deconstructive interpretive mode that challenges upper-caste, nation-centric, and historicist reading practices.[147] Dalit hermeneutics engages in a critical de-naturalisation and de-mystification of caste-construed textualities, holding primarily that the meaning perceived in a text depends both on the social setting in which it is produced, and on the one in which it is received. It is, thus, a consciousness-raising activity regarding the influence of culturally determined caste-based roles and attitudes, and their effects on understanding discourse (Felski, 2011). It does not only critically engage with what is said about Dalits that may diminish their dignity, but also with the silences that presume Dalits' discriminatory status.

This deconstructivist approach is in tune with what scholars Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner have labelled as 'counterpublic'. They view it as a social space that may enable the construction of alternative and oppositional interpretations of culture and identity. According to Fraser, "these subaltern counterpublics […] are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses […] to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990: 67). She adds that,

> [i]n stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. […] their emancipatory potential resides. (68)

It is in this sense that the Dalit literary sphere may be theoretically considered as counterpublic for, to resist the imposed identities of illiterate and silenced victim and establish a Dalit identity from a Dalit perspective, the Dalit public sphere has to run counter to the hegemonic perspectives and occupy a parallel space for the reflexive circulation of a competing and innovative discourse (Brueck, 2014: 80). As Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes, "Dalit literature has emerged as an oppositional voice, puncturing holes in the grand narratives of India's heroic

[147] Gajarawala writes that 'unreading' ultimately "unworks the assumptions undermining the Dalit character as he has been produced by the literary canon", by subverting "the narrative fictional framework in a paratactic way" (Gajarawala, 2011: 580). Gajarawala illustrates, for instance, how Dalit critic Dharamvir reworks Premchand's *Kafan* by inventing a backstory that explains the behaviours of the two Dalit characters (579-80).

struggle against colonialism and its transformation into the 'world's largest democracy'" (Mukherjee, 1998: 34). Today, Dalit works alter both Indian culture and the cultural values embodied in Indian writing, claiming a stake both in knowledge and power.

Dalit Aesthetics

Much of the existing academic analysis on Dalit literature focuses on its social and political content, particularly on the topics of oppression and exploitation, thus overlooking its manipulation of diverse narrative strategies and its literary innovations. As Brueck puts it,

> To remain stuck in an analytical framework of difference while reading newer Dalit literature, far removed from the early virulence of the Panthers' poetry, is to wilfully ignore the ways contemporary Dalit writers engage a particular politics of style in the construction of Dalit chetna. (Brueck, 2014: 81)

What has emerged in the last decades is a literary tradition that, in its desire to restore the dignity of its community, poses a challenge to mainstream Indian literature, both in content and in form. It looks at the Indian social and literary sphere from below but, instead of depicting the plight of the community abiding by upper-caste standards, it tries to be truthful to the Dalit harshness and its complex realities. It attempts to reform the hegemonic culture, to bring to light the limitations and wrongs of the neoliberal state, and to counteract the casteist and elitist discourses by offering a corrective view of how the Dalit subject's identity has been constituted by its condition of existence. Dalits insist that their writing has a particular purpose and audience, which has an important bearing on their literary and aesthetic decisions. The aesthetics and politics —including the conscious formal decisions regarding plots, the style of characters' speech, and the literary imagery— all serve the emancipatory goals of the Dalit movement.

Many Dalit writers have turned their experiences of caste-based discrimination and exclusion into a subject of their narrations, shaping Dalit identity around them. In the words of James Massey (2014), Dalits were forced for centuries to adopt 'the culture of silence', a silence that has been broken by contemporary Dalit writers; implicitly or explicitly, they have converted incidents of humiliation, exploitation and poverty into resentment, defiance, and a quest for

justice. They expose the silences and the gaps for analysis and understanding, but also for subversion and transformation. In tune with this, Toni Morrison argued: “Silence from and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies” (Morrison, 1992: 51). Michel Foucault compares subjugated knowledge “to historical contents that have been buried and disguised in functionalist coherence or formal systematization” (Foucault, 1972: 81). He adds that the insurrection of subjugated knowledges “allow us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle” that the new order or functionalist coherence is designed to mask (81).

As stated before, contemporary Dalit writings did not constitute a unified body of literature from its inception, although several smaller and regional Dalit movements developed almost simultaneously. The fact that they differ geographically enables a diversified picture of the Indian scenario, yet demonstrating that, although Dalit lives vary from one region to another, from one sub-caste to another, or even from one individual to another, there is strong consistency in terms of experience, as well as in the essence of their pitfalls, which thus shapes a marked meta-narrative.

One element of this meta-narrative is location. Tabish Khair argues that landscape in literature constitutes a constructed way of looking at or depicting reality (Khair, 2001: 167). Raymond Williams notes that “the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation” (Williams, 1973: 121), a selected and articulated reality that in Dalit literature focuses mainly on the village/city opposition. Having escaped the confines of the village, and despite the multiple progresses achieved, most Dalits have not rid themselves of casteist discrimination. Contemporary Dalit narratives seek to expose this continuity, both in the rural milieu and most emphatically in the urban one, using the ‘factual’ recounting of self-suffering and psychosomatic agony of living under the gaze of caste as a crucial impetus for the germination of protest.

Another characteristic strand of caste-subaltern subversion is the reclaiming of proprietorship over one’s own body. This is achieved by negating the daily submission of one’s body and its labour to upper-caste demands, and asserting instead a domain of bodily activity (Khair, 2001: 320-21). By doing this, Dalit writers portray the body as a site of contention and constitution. In renegotiating their corporeal worth, they also take possession of the ‘sociology of faeces’ — so often related to their identity— and manipulate it so as to cater to their agenda. Until

recently, scatology has been considered by many mainstream critics as one of the hallmarks of the literature of 'the marginalised', being thus obliterated from elitist aesthetic forums. Due to the resurgence of Dalit politics, Dalit literature has not only survived this demeaning association, but has preserved scatological elements for its own purposes. What used to be the object of abhorrence is now being used by Dalit writers as a way of breaking casteist and elitist aesthetics. To give but one example, Limbale recounts:

> After school we used to go to the river and sit on the sands to eat. Then we went swimming. The high-caste villagers filled their water pots and their women washed their clothes upstream. Downstream the kunbies and shepherds collected water in their vessels and carried them off. They also washed their clothes and bathed. Those who looked after the grazing cattle washed their buffaloes and bathed themselves. The water at the lowest end was meant for us. I used to stand in the river, collect water in my cupped palms and drink it. *One day some mother had washed her baby's clothes that sent a lump of shit floating towards me*. But is there anything purer than water? The water flowing down from up river had already entered my stomach. (Limbale, 2005: 7; emphasis added)

Moreover, compared to the early 20th century, modern Dalit literature has shifted from an exclusive emphasis on the life, thoughts and works of Ambedkar, to depicting the ordinary Dalit. Eleanor Zelliot (2001a) considered that those texts that revolved around Ambedkar are actually divorced from the stories and views of the common Dalits. She even accused this of being a problematic and elitist exercise. The problem could only be circumvented, she concluded, by turning away from an exclusive political perspective to other facets of everyday Dalit life and writings. By articulating the common Dalit, she argued, a new Dalit identity could be built and consolidated. She also reckoned that by introducing transgressive episodes and deliberate statements of protest against caste hierarchies, the spatial delineation of untouchability and its ubiquitous relation to power structures would be evoked and rebuked. Transgression has, in fact, become both a political and an aesthetic choice in contemporary Dalit literature, as it has contributed to challenging the rigid literary boundaries of modern Indian literature.

Due to its tight link to the social assertion movement, Dalit literature also plays a crucial role in developing critical awareness about oppression, empowerment, and social change. Freire's

(1970, 1994) notion of critical consciousness is central to these matters. It involves the development of a critical understanding of the socio-political forces that shape human behaviour and restrain human potential. Isaac Prilleltensky argues that the development of critical consciousness involves two tasks: denunciation and annunciation. On the one hand, denunciation involves the deconstruction of negative narratives that alter peoples' views of the social and political forces that impact their lives. Annunciation, on the other hand, entails the creation of means to promote positive change (Prilleltensky, 1990). Reclaiming devalued or lost cultural identity, many Dalit writers have used transformative research and action as a core project for community and liberation psychology. Rescuing cultural memories and archetypes with which to construct new, transformed, and more dignified identities has been part of many Dalit writers' agenda. Contrasting with the objectified and aestheticised Dalit characters in upper-caste writing, these Dalit writers are committed to shaping agentive and transformative roles for themselves in their own literature.

Several strategies have been used in their quest for acquiring political and social power, among them rediscovering and retelling history. Understanding the power of myths, during the post-independent era Dalits began to negate many, adapt some and invent new ones to make meaning out of their lives, as well as to instil pride, honour and confidence, and galvanise them into a Dalit unity. Speaking about the effect of myths on individuals, Mircea Eliade contends that they serve the function, not only of 'explaining' the ancient past and who we really are, but also of bringing the energies of essential sources of being into the present, for what can be considered primarily therapeutic or re-creative purposes (Eliade, 2017). In the case of Dalits, it has been argued that myths have the power to consolidate their collective thinking, reinforce their present plight, and forge a more positive identity; one that would restore their sense of dignity and shape a new self-conception against the derogatory one that has been imposed upon them. They seek to reclaim a cultural heritage of achievement and self-respect in traditional proverbs and tales, and stories that decry oppression and deny degradation based on birth-given status.

One of these manipulations of folk culture is the myth of Bali.[148] In the Brahminical lore, Bali is an *asura* —a demon king— who, through his nobility and righteousness, cajoles his subjects

[148] In the Puranic narrative, King Bali is the descendant of an illustrious line of demons. Righteous and benevolent, he leads a virtuous life full of meritorious deeds and is honoured by his subjects as 'Mahabali' (the great Bali). Impressed by his nobility and excellent governing abilities, many surrounding kings accept his leadership and

and other kings into being under his sovereignty. Set out to restore order and prevent a demon king from extending his control, the Hindu god Vishnu, disguised as the Brahmin dwarf Vaman, tricks Bali into death. In the popular Dalit tradition, however, the Bali-Vaman story invokes a radically different imagination: stressing it as a great Brahminical treachery, king Bali is viewed as the noble indigenous king who bravely wards off the attack of Aryan invaders, but ends up deceived and destroyed (Omvedt, 2008).[149] Dalits' identification with the tradition of Bali, and the analogy between upper castes and Vaman, is somewhat reasonable as the Bali-Vaman myth gives clues to understand India's past, particularly Dalits' disenfranchisement. Dalits have used this myth as a symbolic site of ongoing negotiations on the terms of cultural identity and social hierarchy. They incorporated it into their literature, using the character of Bali to debate, challenge, and assert established identities.[150]

Scholars Charsley and Karanth argue that imagination and memory, which may be construed out of myth and history, are "the foundational requirement for the identity, self-respect and social existence of the marginalized communities", as they allow them to make positive claims of identity (Charsley & Karanth, 2006: 13). Thus, apart from repairing their cultural past, folk tales and hero stories have also been used by Dalit writers to promote Dalit pride by celebrating their acts of bravery and revealing facets of Dalit culture often absent from elitist history. Omprakash Valmiki, for instance, searches for his community's dignity in the epic of *Mahabharata*:

> The whole class had responded with great emotion to this story of Dronacharya's dire poverty. This episode was penned by Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*, to highlight Drona's poverty. I had the temerity to stand up and ask Master Saheb

suzerainty, helping to expand thus King Bali's kingdom. The Aryan Brahmins, however, alarmed at the prospect of being ruled by a demon king, approach the god and supreme protector Vishnu and ask him to restore their authority. Vishnu incarnates himself as Vaman, a Brahmin dwarf, and approaches King Bali as a beggar. Vaman begs the king to donate him the land he would be able to cover with three of his steps. Bali, though intrigued by the irony in the dwarf's petition, grants him the wish. Then, Vaman rises to a monstrous form and covers the earth in one step, and the heaven in the second. For the third step, Vaman places his foot on Bali's head and pushes him to the netherworld. However, pleased by Bali's sacrifice, Vishnu grants him the permission to visit his subjects once every year (Omvedt, 2008).

[149] In the state of Kerala, the festival of Onam is still celebrated so as to mark the yearly return of their beloved Mahabali. During the celebration, Onappottan, a symbolic representation of King Bali, visits homes and gives blessings.

[150] Umesh Kumar's *Bhartiya Achambha* ("The Wonder of India") offers a Dalit re-interpretation of this ancient history (Kumar qtd. in Narayan & Misra, 2004: 48).

> a question afterward. […] How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives? (Valmiki, 2003: 26; emphasis in the original)

Another example of Dalit rejection of Hindu and casteist mythology is Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu* (2002). Among the many interesting dimensions of Ilaiah's account is its attempt to isolate and describe Dalit culture as different from that of Hindus, contrasting it favourably with an unremittingly negative portrayal of upper-caste Hindu culture. He begins by writing: "I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know that they were Hindus" (Ilaiah, 2002: 1). His parents only knew that they were *Kurumaas*, a local Dalit caste. They were not allowed to enter Hindu temples nor worship Hindu gods; no Hindu religious texts ever entered their homes and literacy was, of course, prohibited to them (11). One of his outstanding —and equally controversial— attempts at granting Dalit culture a positive signification is how he tackles sexual relationships. Unlike restrictive Hindus, Ilaiah points out that Dalits treat "family life [as] a part of production" (33). He tries to give it a positive spin adding:

> Here even sexual intercourse is an organic need of the body […]. This undefined love retains its naturalness among the Dalitbahujans. Among the Hindus the man-woman relationship is conditioned by manipulation and deceptivity. Dalitbahujan relationships on the other hand are based on openness. (34)

The aim for recognition of oppression, deconstruction of its source, and the reinterpretation of Dalit identity has resulted in 'moral polarisation' created by contemporary Dalit writers, which demands readers to align unquestionably with the side of the 'good', and hence the 'good Dalit' (Brueck, 2014: 84). Dalit critic Sheoraj Singh Bechain adds that "What one expects to find in the consciousness of a Dalit character […] is rage, anger with respect to inequality […]. Any character who lives in anticipation of kindness, sympathy, generosity, and pity, cannot be a Dalit" (Bechain qtd. in Rai, 2008: 162). This practice of pitting absolute signifiers of 'good' and 'evil' against one another is predominant in Dalit literature. The conflict between the moral pole of the bad —inhabited by the upper-caste proponents of caste inequality— and the moral pole of the good —personified by the victimised, and always innocent, Dalit characters— is continuously reinforced as a means of recovering Dalit subjectivity and visibility. In the majority of Dalit narratives, the central Dalit character is morally upright and represents an

unambiguous pillar in the battle between good and evil, while the rest of the characters are constructed archetypes of the 'good Dalits' and the 'bad Brahmins'. As Brueck sharply acknowledges, there is no space for moral ambiguity (Brueck, 2014: 91). The purpose behind this strategy is to make readers aware of the ethical conflict at the heart of these stories, and ultimately transform it into a new reality. Ajay Navaria's "Hello, Premchand!" (2013) is a good example of this moral polarisation. In this story, Navaria deploys semantic reversals and reimagines Premchand's criticised texts by investing each Dalit character with more anger, determination and courage than Premchand's. His unyielding aim is to transform suffering and atrocities into rage and power of struggle.

Brueck informs that the blatant stereotyping that all Dalits by nature are inherently more humanist and compassionate than members of upper castes is often typical of subaltern political discourses, as an attempt to counteract the demeaning rhetoric (Brueck, 2014: 47). Maxime Rodinson has highlighted such aggrandisement of the benevolent nature of oppressed communities by their leaders:

> [o]ppressed people is to be defended because it is oppressed and to the exact extent to which it is oppressed. On the contrary, the oppressed are sanctified and every aspect of their actions, their culture, their past, present and future behavior is presented as admirable. Direct or indirect narcissism takes over […]. The slightest criticism is seen as criminal sacrilege. In particular, it becomes quite inconceivable that the oppressed might themselves be oppressing others. (Rodinson qtd. in Harlow, 1987: 29)

The depiction of submissive and passive Dalit characters is utterly criticised and considered as highly counter-productive. Surajpal Chauhan's *Badbu* ("Stench") (2003) attempts to illustrate the depths to which a bright young mind can sink when the rhetoric of social backwardness and inequality is deeply ingrained. Meaning 'bad odour', *Badbu* describes the life of Santhoshi, a Dalit young woman who, although very good at studies, cannot pursue higher studies and is forced to marry a Dalit who does scavenging work. Santhoshi's upper-caste friends try to persuade her into continuing her studies but, given her social and economic circumstances, she has to comply with her station. Chauhan's narrative drew fire from other Dalit writers who accused it of being 'against Ambedkarite philosophy' and harmful to the movement. They argued that it is not 'realistic' to think that Brahmins would think more progressively than Dalit

characters. Chauhan was also criticised for not grounding the story in historical time and implying that this was still presently happening, thereby glossing over the social progress and political consciousness achieved, and propagating instead a negative community image.

Therefore, writing signifies for contemporary Dalit literature the staging of identifications in a process of protesting and empowerment. It was Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* (2018) that brought forth a brave new voice in the Dalit literary sphere. Far from limiting his narrative to sad and pitiful accounts of Dalit life, Bagul's characters blaze with rage against the horrors of the caste system. They are strong and bold individuals, who question and defy casteism at every step. In the short story "*Revolt*", young Dalit Jai, influenced by Ambedkarite philosophy, opposes his parents' resolution that he should work as a manual scavenger, and is adamant on his decision to continue his studies so as to "destroy this inhuman practice of untouchability" (91). His father, nevertheless, wants to "dispel the white collar dreams his son had been nurturing" (90), as they "ironically sliced all his family's hopes" (93). Jai's family assimilation of their doomed fate as a rightful penance is strikingly illustrated by Bagul:

> But you are the son of a Bhangi. What problem can you have with doing this job? People pay to get these jobs […]. And here you're getting one free. [It is written] in our poverty. In our dharma. In our country. (92-3)

Jai, on the other hand, stirs up to revolt: "What dharma? If it breaks a person and turns him into an animal, […] I will not heed such a dharma. If it has given us only this poverty, this deprivation, then it behoves us to reject it" (92-3). He adds, "I am a Mahar but that does not mean I'm going to clean human shit and piss from the walls" (125). Education represented for him the key to open the iron doors of slavery and suppression. It made him aware of his right to live as a human being, and it provided him with certain courage to resist the oppression stemming from the upper castes as well as from his own community.

In *Sangati* (2008), Bama sets out to instigate Dalit women who will read it "to rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society" (ix). The pain of Dalit women portrayed in *Sangati* is turned into words, and words are converted into a thrust for action and change. At the same time, Bama intends to deconstruct the stereotypes of Dalit women as passive victims, putting their liveliness and resistance to the yoke imposed upon them on display. In *Karukku* (2014) Bama progressively unveils her eyes,

and she questions the assumed upper-caste superiority: "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?" (Bama, 2014: 27). She also hints at the changing times by underlining the difference in attitude of those who "patiently accept and endure their hard lives, consoling themselves that this was the destiny given to them" and those "who know that this is neither our fate nor our destiny, and who are making efforts to challenge these atrocities" (80).

Baby Kamble also bears witness to this change in Dalits' frame of mind. While most older Dalit characters are portrayed in *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) as submissive figures, many young ones have seemingly acquired agency and voice, and dare to challenge institutionalised discrimination. As she puts it, "it is a basic human need to hope for change" (Kamble, 2008: 11), and she illustrates the general feeling of resentment among Dalits:

> You drink [our] blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of [our] misery. Doesn't it pollute you then? […] you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. […] But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. (56)

Similarly, Dalit writer Y. B. Satyanarayana encourages Dalits to distance themselves from their past in search for a better life, to develop a collective will to rise and resist, and to write their own histories. He argues: "The stories written by Brahmins beginning with 'Once upon a time, there lived a poor Brahmin…' should stop now" (Satyanarayana, 2011: xxii). This new Dalit identity that he proclaims is epitomised in his text by his father, Baliah:

> He had set an example for many Dalit families […]. He was no social reformer and had not read Ambedkar, but he fought social evils at his own level and was uncompromising in his fight. He had refused to be subservient to anyone throughout his life, and had therefore commanded respect even from those who belonged to the higher castes. (209-10)

By the same token, Narendra Jadhav lays bare the newly constructed Dalit pride through the character of Damu, who refuses to follow the Yeskar tradition, against his entire family:

> What kind of a tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs? […] I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am not going to abide by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for baluta. (Jadhav, 2005: 24)

Damu goes on to claim: "We must have self-respect. We must have dignity. […] I don't want rights as a dog. I want my human rights" (33). Jadhav reckons that it was precisely his father's vision that ensured him and his family a life free from the trap of casteist inequities, and inspired the new generations to come. Jadhav demonstrates this through his own daughter, who takes the reigns of the narrative by the end:

> My grandfather's and Dr. Ambedkar's efforts have been brought to fruition in my generation. I have no reminders of being a Dalit, or any reasons to think I am different from my peers. My ancestors worked hard to make my life just like that of any other girl in the world. I have the torch they have lit for me and nothing can stop me now. (295)

The reaffirmation and self-assertion in these texts contradict, without doubt, the presumed passivity of Dalits and do away with the previously imposed identities of the 'pitied' and the 'mute' subjects. In this sense, Dalit texts are not only objects of knowledge, but sources of knowledge (Felski, 2008). They structure the beliefs and mechanisms of the community and help envision the social experience from which they emerged. But when discussing marginalised literatures, such as the Dalit, it is impossible to ignore the role of language. Not only is it a medium through which aesthetic effects are produced, it is also, as Arun Kamble states, a metaphor for a radically altered social order (Kamble, 1992: 54). When you read a text, as Amit Chaudhuri claims, "You turn to a language that seems the only language adequate to [the writer's] altered vision of reality, and of [himself]" (Chaudhuri, 2008: 56). Given that language has already been rendered hegemonic in every sphere of Indian life, it is the task of oppressed writers to carve out a different language, distinct from conventional understandings of the hegemonic group. As Narayan and Misra put it, "the selection of words means the selection of a world that speaks that language" (Narayan & Misra, 2004: 25).

"All culture after Auschwitz including its urgent critique is garbage", wrote Theodor Adorno (1995: 367) at a time when the shock of discovering the extent of the atrocities committed

during the Second World War was so overwhelming that it was deemed unrepresentable. In the case of Dalits, the inadequacy of an existing language to reference their predicament and desired form of social reality could only be remedied by the shaping of language itself. Many Dalit writers have decried writing for the oppressed in a Sanskritised elitist language as a contradiction, and sought to prove that literariness does not exclusively require using sublime, stylised language. Moreover, their target readers not being the élite, they did not aim at acceptability, but affirmation of their culture and identity. Thus, they endeavoured to shift from traditional Indian discourse and to dismantle canonical language and its patterns in order to convey an authentic, yet unacknowledged, reality.

Language has become the vehicle Dalit writers use to reveal the trauma they have faced. By common consent, they need to translate their experiences and sentiments into a specific protest poetics, relying on the difference of its literary language as a source of power. Arguing that the social aspect of Dalit life is best represented by a Dalit register, they seek to imitate speech in their writing by employing an oral mode —in this case, that of illiterate low-caste speakers. They also radicalise language through the use of dialects, regional language, and colloquial words, despite being aware that upper-caste or non-Dalit readers would have difficulties in grasping it.[151] They are, thus, adamant in their aim to assert their right to a space and voice that are not mediated from an external point of view.

"The Dalit should write as a Dalit", declared Bama (2001) in an interview. She added that, due to his/her Dalit identity, the Dalit writer must disturb what she calls "the superficial orderliness of the status quo", by which she refers to the rules of grammar, syntax, prosody, and the so-called decency of standard languages (Bama, 1999: 98). As a Dalit writer herself, she unequivocally made sure to stamp her 'Dalitness' on her writings:

> One thing that gives me most satisfaction is that I used the language of my people —a language that was not recognized by the pundits of literature, was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, was not included in the norms of Tamil literature. (Bama, 2001; web page)

[151] Very little of Dalit literature is actually written in English, as most Dalit writers work in their first language and are only now beginning to be translated.

Dalit texts must allow access to their inner feelings, verbalised through their own words, true to the way they experienced them (Dangle, 1992b: xlii). The use of the first person is, for instance, a clear evidence of the 'interiority' of the narration. As Limbale puts it, it is as if, by capturing each detail and reproducing it deliberately in a language opposite to that of upper-caste literature, the Dalit writer conveys the essence of 'Dalitness' (Limbale, 2004).

Bama considers writing from the margin as a political and militant act. Thus, she seeks to subvert dominant perception, representation and articulation of Dalit women's lives. The language she deploys both in *Karukku* and *Sangati* performs her rebellion. Shifting between the axis of subjectivity and referentiality, she uses a confessional and conversational mode of writing detached from refined and elitist vocabulary. She articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed, emphasising 'difference' as a principle of affirmation. She illustrates that the language of protest can be articulated in different ways: the language in *Sangati* is the loud voice of banter, strident and spontaneous, while *Karukku* is narrated in a more moderate tone but still lacking elaborate linguistic artifice and using a straightforward rhetoric. Lakshmi Holmström writes that by doing so, Bama "overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading" (Holmström, 2014b: xix).

Bama acknowledges that she found herself using the language of her childhood in *Karukku*, the Tamil dialect that Dalits spoke in her natal village. She assumed she would return later and 'correct' it into standardised Tamil, yet the words that first flowed conveyed her experience with an intensity and specificity that standard Tamil could never possibly do. Aware of the expressive sharpness that voicing one's experience in one's mother tongue grants the writer, she ultimately chose to stay true to her prose.

The language purposefully used in Dalit texts is, thus, another reflection of their desire for authenticity. Dalit writers choose to write in the language of Dalit reality, as polished literary language has not been considered apt in the depiction of their experiences and emotions. The poetic overturn is, however, larger than a simple reversal of diction into anti-diction. Beyond the literary introduction of the brutality of slum life, beyond the political inscription of the coarse and the obscene made taboo in upper-caste poetics, it not only aims at representing vulgarity, but also at conceptualising it as 'belonging to the people' (Prasad, 2013: 611).

Limbale insists that since the Dalit reality is distinct, so must be the language of this reality. It is an uncouth-impolite language of the *basti* —Dalit neighbourhood— which does not recognise cultivated grammar or standard language (Limbale, 2004: 33). Limbale justifies that the simple and at times rude language has an undertone of self-defence. Dalit writers refuse to 'decorate', neutralise or camouflage their content. Instead, they "strip language of its hygienist rules of propriety and correctness" (Zecchini, 2018: 78). Experiences of deprivation and intense emotions are better expressed in a crude and rough language that facilitates the vivid portrayal of marginality and suffering. Authenticity and liveliness, fresh and artful rhetorical strategies, intense vocabulary, and scenes using descriptive words which produce sensory details about the filth, odour and misery that usually surround Dalits, have become hallmarks of Dalit literature. They all function as an effective tool to attach unconventional connotations to the images usually directed to the conventional routes of the imagination. This disruptive aesthetic is highlighted by Dilip Chitre on Namdeo Dhasal's style:

> The graphic imagery of Dhasal's poems often zooms in on the contents of sewers and stagnant pools of water that even in their verbalized and therefore somewhat distanced form hit us both by way of sight and smell. Our senses are besieged, as it were, by almost palpable filth and stink […]. (Chitre, 2007: 12)

As can be seen, Dalit writers normally display a heightened awareness of the literary —and social— impact of manipulating and interweaving various registers of language. Their stylistic strategies include in-text glossing of dialectical speech, selective employment of both dialectical and modern standard Hindi, as well as selective use of English vocabulary. Bakhtin argues that the ideological orientation of a text can only be understood by the analysis of the author's manipulation of diverse registers and styles of language, as they are not neutral relational systems of signifiers and signifieds. Rather, they have the power to represent distinct worldviews (Bakhtin, 1998: 288). He goes on to state that the existence of multiple worldviews within heteroglossic linguistic systems underscores social stratification: "Social stratification is […] primarily determined by differences between the expressive planes of various belief systems —that is, stratification expresses itself in typical differences in ways used to conceptualize and accentuate elements of language" (Bakhtin, 1998: 290).

Following Bakhtin's postulation, Dalit literature certainly puts on display the casteist social stratification in the wielding of heteroglossic speech, both strategically and intentionally. This linguistic stratification usually distinguishes between urban and rural, modern and traditional, progressive and backward, and politically awakened from unconscious characters. As Brueck states, "It is in characters' monologues and dialogues that authors employ alternative registers of language that mark speakers in the process of making meaning" (Brueck, 2014: 103-04). She further says that the usage of heteroglossia in contemporary Dalit writing is another way of making clear the author's ethical stance around the Dalit agenda, and it is also a strategy of pointing out characters possessing different levels of Dalit *chetna*. For many contemporary Dalit writers, Dalit consciousness cannot simply be expressed in regional dialects on account of their inescapable connotations of tradition, backwardness, and political ignorance. Thus, the employment of dialects does more than differentiate between characters' regional origins and education levels. For a character to speak in a 'marked' simplified, non-standard language is to exhibit a deficiency of Dalit *chetna*, to be characterised not only as 'rural', but to be condemned as 'backward' (Brueck, 2014).

Omprakash Valmiki is one of those Dalit writers that dialogise Dalit *chetna*. Valmiki's *Pacchis Chauka Derh Sau* ("25 Times Four Equals 150") (2000) contains several themes common to Dalit literature, including the urban-rural divide, where the city is posited as the site of opportunity and progress, while rural social hierarchies stagnate and fester. The story is an inter-generational narrative that illustrates the transformation of a Dalit family's fortune when the younger generation is educated. The story is told from the perspective of Sudeep, a young Dalit who is returning to his village after receiving his first pay check from a new job in the city so as to share his accomplishment with his parents. As the story begins, Sudeep is riding a bus to his village and meditating on how far he has come from village life. Sudeep's father, significantly marked by caste-based inferiority, is dialectically made different, while both the third-person narration and Sudeep's own speech remains unmarked. Sudeep's father occasionally glosses over words, presents a rural dialectical patterning, and uses Urdu words instead of Hindi. Valmiki, thus, locates in his story the nonstandard and unpolished speech in the voices of village characters so as to convey their ignorance and backwardness as caused by casteism. This stands in stark contrast to the standard register and elevated rhetoric of the city-returned and politically conscious protagonist.

Contemporary Dalit writers have thus inherited a focus on language as an encoded system of representation and assertion, albeit in a different form from that which the early Dalit writers wielded. Modern Dalit literature's nuanced treatment of literary language and its intentional approach to narrative form allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the interstices of Dalit activism, 'consciousness', and literary expression. "Style is not only the power to symbolize enormous generalities, but also a form of displacement and incorporation by which one voice becomes a whole history" (Saïd, 2003: 243), asserts Saïd in his acclaimed *Orientalism*. The 'Dalitisation' of aesthetics entails questioning the tenets of classical aesthetics. Limbale declares that it is definitely a 'deconstructive enterprise' (Limbale, 2004: 15) as Dalit writers expose and deconstruct previously manufactured and institutionalised versions of Indian history and society.

In the process of creating authentic representations, Dalit literature is highly mimetic of Dalit life. Determined to portray the seamier side of it, it lays bare ignorance, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, and death. Dalit literary creations are marked by a sense of physicality, and operate within a trans-subjective expressivist aesthetics. As Bali Sahota points out, far from remaining corporeally abstracted, this aesthetics addresses an interrelated sphere of the body, emotions and everyday sociality embedded in the texts' form, language, and intertextuality. He adds that the meaning produced is to be experienced as potentially transformative bodily sensations (Sahota, 2008: 194).

Authentic representations involve, then, an unromanticised and unpitying reflection of the materiality of Dalit life. As Limbale puts forth, Dalit literature does not adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, nor does it share the devotional literature's otherworldly concerns, nor the bourgeois literature's involvement with individual desires, insecurities and alienation. It is neither a pleasure-giving literature of fine sentiments and refined gestures, nor a narcissistic wallowing in self-pity. Rather, it is 'purposive', revolutionary, transformational and liberatory. Limbale explains that this last idea is not based on the fact that all Dalit writers adhere to a radical ideology, such as socialism or Marxism. It rests on the view that, inasmuch as transforming the condition of the Dalit and challenging the caste system is a revolutionary cause, a literature that is entirely dedicated to it is, by definition, radical (Limbale, 2004: 14). Dalit literature, thus, lays claim to aesthetic 'difference'.

Laura Brueck states that the 'difference' of these texts is not reduced to the rejection of those conventions labelled by Limbale as 'pretentious', but rather lies in their strategic adaptation of anger, resistance, and caustic realism, and in the introduction of innovative narrative styles (Brueck, 2014: 8). She affirms that the bulk of Dalit texts construct a hegemonic narrative style dominated by melodramatic realism. Through this dualistic mode, on the one hand, Dalit literature strives to present realistic and detailed representations of the material, social, and emotional conditions of Dalit life, in a logical contiguity of events that lends credibility to the texts. On the other, it offers a melodramatic interpretation of the Ambedkarite ideological mission to emancipate Dalits from an imposed identity of inferiority (17).

According to Brueck's postulation, contemporary Dalit writers have interwoven and privileged expressive strategies of both realism and melodrama in their efforts to represent an authentic Dalit experience, as well as to manifest their commitment to Dalit *chetna*. In the words of Shalini Ramachandran, Dalit literature shapes identity while demanding ameliorative action (Ramachandran, 2004: 30). By deploying this narrative mode, Dalit writers intend to unambiguously stir readers and demand their sympathy towards the Dalit cause. Ajay Navaria compares the use of this realist aesthetic to the necessity of lancing a cyst on the body of Hindu society. While the substance that the cyst releases may be unpleasant, its cathartic release is said to be necessary for the healing of the social body (Navaria qtd. in Brueck, 2014: 84).

It is not surprising, thus, that Dalit literature should usually avoid using the comic mode in its depiction of untouchability and caste discrimination, foregrounding instead Dalit agency and resistance. Ajay Navaria's short story "Yes Sir" (2012) is one of the exceptions in Dalit writing where comedy is derived from the inversion of caste hierarchy. Set in contemporary India, the story is narrated from the perspective of Ramnarayan Tiwari, a Brahmin peon who resents the fact that his boss, Narottam Saroj, is a Dalit. He is convinced that Narottam's promotion is not due to personal merit but solely the result of job reservations for low castes in the public sector —a programme of positive discrimination that was established by the Indian state shortly after Independence. The roles of peon and Deputy General Manager in the story do not match the caste hierarchy actually established in Indian society, and the humour derives from this inversion, and the knowledge that an upper caste has to clean a Dalit's toilet.

Another recurrent feature in Dalit aesthetics is the episodic mode of narration. Instead of following a linear pattern, Dalit narratives usually move from memory to memory,

demonstrating how their present is deeply scarred by their past, in spite of the distance they have traversed. The episodic plot covers a set of interconnected incidents that happen in the characters' lives. As a cognizant writer, Bama, for instance, experiments with the form and theme of her texts and brings out a political edge to the experiences recorded. Her writing style is a mixture of photographic realism and creative interpretation, organically united to evolve a call for practical action. The very form of *Karukku* flouts the traditional notions of writing as multiple narration is employed to cover a span of three generations. The events of Bama's life are not arranged according to a simple, linear or chronological order. Rather the author reflects upon them from different periods and perspectives, and groups them under different themes such as 'village', 'work', 'games', 'education', and 'faith'.

Most Dalit texts are not chronological or developmental narratives that follow the individual life-cycle in smooth transitions. In the words of Pramod Nayar, Dalit narratives often deploy 'achronicity' in which events are deprived of all temporal connections and exploit instead a multivalued system of temporal ordering (Nayar, 2011). Dalit writers prove to be well-aware of the role that time-setting has in a story. They also play with the narrative tempo, alternating time accelerating and decelerating stylistic methods to go along different phases in the characters' lives; episodes of struggle are usually narrated in a slow tempo, while moments of advancement are usually narrated in a faster pace.

Meena Kandasamy, for instance, uses many devices in *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) to make readers uncomfortable. Among them, its non-linear narration. As she explains:

> It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result; it has no lifelikeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality; its characters are confusedly drawn, and by their acts and words they prove that they are not the sort of people the author claims that they are. […] If you are finding this difficult to follow, remember that not only am I weighed down by the task of telling a story, but also that you are equally responsible for your misery. (Kandasamy, 2014: 31-2)

Besides its non-linearity, the novel constitutes a revolutionary and unconventional text for many reasons. There is no actual protagonist and, instead, a constant alternation of points of view, through a wide variety of narrative voices, adds to the narrative's polyphony and

complexity. Moreover, Kandasamy entangles readers through direct references to them, almost as if they were another one of her characters:

> So, this degenerate narrative merely mirrors the fact that all of you, my darling readers, have been living non-linear, amoral lives without any sense of purpose. Life is linear, I can hear you argue. […] Those of you stressed out by this haphazard storytelling, please relax. Stay, those of you who have thought too many times of wandering away. How far away from me can you stray? This is a joint adventure. We collaborate on the critical condition that we do not abandon each other. (32)

The most outstanding aspect of the novel is its very structure. In Part One "Background", the author puts forth her anxieties on how to tell her story, having been culturally influenced and burdened with the style of archaic poetry, and being a first-generation Dalit woman novelist writing in English. She writes: "I am willing to try everything to get this story across" (29). What follows is a list of chapters that are far from being conceptually and visually homogeneous, as they take different forms: an apparent 'Questions and Answer' section, a letter, a political pamphlet, a postmodern digression on the very nature of story-telling, chronologically ordered stories and disconnected accounts of fragmented traumatic experiences, and an official report, to name but a few. This display of different frames is Kandasamy's attempt to better recreate the atrocious events. As Dolores Herrero puts it, the experimental nature of this novel allows Kandasamy to confront readers with an unpalatable reality that no conventional realist novel could have possibly depicted with such poignancy and forcefulness (Herrero, 2019: 70).

Due to its particular aesthetics, Dalit literature has been accused of being propagandist, univocal, biased and lacking artistic merit. Limbale came up in its defence arguing that intense lived and felt experiences cannot be called propagandistic. He added that the source of its univocality is, on the one hand, the similarity of the experiences narrated:

> The name of the village may well be different, but the nature of tyranny against Dalits is the same. Social boycott, separate bastis, wells and cremation grounds; inability to find rental accommodation; the necessity to conceal caste; denial of admission to public places; injustices done to Dalit women; dragging and cutting of dead animals —these experiences are alike for all Dalits. Because of the

commonalities in Dalit writers' thoughts, experiences and emotions, Dalit literature appears to be univocal. (Limbale, 2004: 35)

On the other, the expression of a common ideological view in all Dalit literature adds to that unanimity. Regarding its non-objective nature, Limbale argues that this literature has made a declaration for human values and, therefore, it cannot be neutral. Finally, against the allegation of it lacking artistic finesse and presenting excessive resentment, he explains that this resentment is the expression of anguish, rage and rebellion that have been silenced and suppressed for a long time. It is inappropriate then to expect this pain to be restrained or, even worse, artistic (34-6).

The fact that Dalit writers have chosen to distance themselves from the pre-existent stylistic devices and have focused on writing in the 'raw' is, in itself, a gesture of protest. By diverting from it, Dalit writers help building and consolidating confidence and pride in their culture. This is in tune with Richard Lannoy's notion of 'antipodal culture' (1974) which functions in diametric opposition to the hegemonic order. He explains that while hegemonic culture stresses obedience, order and adherence to taboos, differences and distinctions, antipodal culture stresses community life, the overcoming of differences, unity, and living an epicurean life. Taking his consideration as a basis, antipodal culture seems closer to the lifestyle of marginalised communities, such as the Dalit.

This closeness to the authentic Dalit culture is what motivated the new generation of Dalit writers to term their narrative style as 'mud-house' writing, as opposed to the 'élite' writing (Guru, 2001a). The credit for beginning this new style may be attributed to the writer Vemula Yellaiah's input.[152] When asked about a writer's preference between intelligibility and representation, Yellaiah avers that Dalit writers have to prefer representation to intelligibility and points out that cultural representation cannot be sacrificed for readability (Yellaiah, 2009). The proponents of this new style defend their transgressive language on the grounds that it is close to the language actually spoken by Dalits.

As has been illustrated, Dalit literature has gone from a purely content-based perspective — that too often sweeps Dalit narratives into the province of political rhetoric— to a vibrant,

[152] The most outstanding of his productions is *Kakka* (2000).

original, and constantly developing literary style. It has moved beyond a literal adherence to realistic aesthetics, adorning realism with other aesthetic interventions including melodrama, heteroglossia, and postmodernist strategies such as those used by Kandasamy, all in an effort to reclaim a space and authority over its own representation.

Marginalised Life Narratives

Michel Foucault affirms that Dalit literatures have so far been considered mostly as literatures that document social, economic and political situations, and not literatures in their own right (Foucault, 1972). With its multiple sociological layers and multiple expressions, it is undeniable that this literature acts like a reflection of reality, an exploration of social realism; behind its fictional names there is always one or the other real character, and behind the thin veil of fictionalised incidents lies the depiction of solid reality. Moreover, the style employed in the narrativisation of experience contributes to blurring the difference between reality and fiction.

The very utterance of the term 'Dalit' is, unquestionably, a political statement. Therefore, Dalit writing cannot be considered just a literary movement; it is necessarily part of a political movement. Limbale (2004) understands the relationship between literature and politics in the Dalits' case as one of complementarity. Combining personal experiences with Marxism and Ambedkarism, he suggests that Dalit writers play a significant role in the political and ideological contestations involved in constructing a just Indian society. In tune with Limbale, Valmiki (2001) adds that the emergence of a Dalit literary movement creates an ideological and unifying background for their burgeoning political movement, while Arun Prabha Mukherjee states that Ambedkarite ideology functions as a 'pre-text' to contemporary Dalit literature (Mukherjee, 1998: 45). Building upon Limbale's idea of 'complementarity', Debjani Ganguly (2005) suggests that Dalit narratives articulate in an accessible manner the suffering and historical injustice that political action seeks to overcome. Thus, unlike political representation, which fails to underscore the nuances of Dalit identities, literary representation would allow the reader to engage with the complexities involved in the process of identity formation.

Some critics argue that Dalit literature is not just a simple 'catalyst' for or supplement to Dalit politics, but a politics of fundamental significance in itself. Taking a cue from Jacques Rancière, literature is political in the primary sense that it reconstitutes the 'sensible' realm; that is, a politics performed at the level of texts and various interpretations. As Rancière proposes,

> The politics of literature is not the same thing as the politics of writers. It does concern the personal engagements of writers in the social or political struggles of their times. Neither does it concern the way writers represent social structures, political movements or various identities in their books. The expression 'politics of literature' implies that literature 'does' politics simply by being literature. […] It assumes that there is an essential connection between politics as a specific form of collective practice and literature as a well-defined practice of the art of writing. (Rancière, 2011b: 3)

In this context, the very act of writing becomes political in its potentiality to disturb and redistribute the system of divisions and hierarchies that define what is visible and audible in the aesthetic-political regime (Rancière, 2004). Through writing or reading, otherwise denied to Dalit communities, they acquire a life of 'thought and intellectuality', and they are able to reclaim and invent their subjectivity. As the writer and one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers, Namdeo Dhasal, writes: "I had found my weapons and I sharpened them" (Dhasal, 2007: 166). This narrative of resistance and 'engenderment', in which disgrace and pity are transformed into insurrectionary pride, must obviously be correlated to the political and symbolic act of self-definition.

Yet, treating these texts simply as sociological tracts on the Dalit condition is, according to Pramod Nayar (2011), to ghettoise them and to disregard their distinctive form and voice. It consigns them to the category of 'authentic representations of the Dalit experience', thus rendering them aesthetically insignificant. Dalit writers have made an effort to adopt particular narrative conventions and aesthetic modes in which the historical is merged with the immediate or personal, in an attempt to achieve a narrative hybridisation that stakes political claims (Nayar, 2006, 2008). Thus, to read these texts as merely offering truthful pictures of Dalit reality is to negate their artistic significance.

The fact that it is the authentic Dalit experience and their pain that bind one narrative event to the next, assembling Dalits into a symbolic community of fellow sufferers, has prompted many critics and Dalit writers to refer to Dalit texts as 'narratives of pain'. Omprakash Valmiki begins his autobiography by asserting: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation" (Valmiki, 2003: xiii). He points to the ubiquitous pain attached to the Dalit subject, whether experienced as social exclusion, verbal humiliation, or actual physical violence. Yet, far from being mere expressions of hardships and imprisoning Dalits in eternal victimhood, they have become tools of political assertion, in which experiences of pain are transformed into narratives of resistance (Beth, 2015). This can be seen in Bama's *Karukku*, as she continuously switches the focal point from invoking Dalit victimhood towards focusing on the interrelationship between caste and patriarchy, and the modes of resistance that Dalit women develop against it.

Narratives of resistance are said to embody the voices of the oppressed that hold a mirror to dominating systems and, thereby, encourage them to introspect. They usually contain oppositional ideas and heterodox behaviours as resistance to the hegemonic social, cultural and political norms of the élite. In her book *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow calls the process of reconstruction of a history of social resistance an 'affiliative secular order' over the more commonly assumed non-history of centuries of silent subservience. She codifies the shared aesthetic and ideological foundations of resistance literatures of various movements around the world, emphasising the political imperative as the driving force: "Resistance literature calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicised activity […] involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production" (Harlow, 1987: 28). Following Harlow's definition, Dalit cultural productions definitely embody a creative expression of social and political opposition and liberation from upper-caste ideologies and canons.

Harlow, nonetheless, conveys three fundamental concerns for resistance texts: the difficult access to history for those who have been historically denied an active role in it; the problem of contested terrain; and the social and political transformation from a genealogy of filiation based on ties of kinship, ethnicity, race or religion to an affiliative secular order (22). Dalits must accordingly first deconstruct their crystallised identity, and then replace it with a new kind of self-expression that would aim at transforming, not only the way they see themselves, but also the way society perceives them. The terrain they are contesting is that of representation

itself, an area that is at once cultural, material and political. For contemporary Dalit writers, the real challenge lies in creating a fine balance between the idea of inclusion and the necessity of resistance.

Literature reflects upon the multi-faceted nature of human experiences. In the case of the Dalit community, its literature has undergone a drastic transformation as a means to respond to the changing social dynamics, shifting its tone from resignation and resilience to defiance and strong dissent. In the second half of the 20th century, apart from exposing the wrongs of Indian society, Dalit literature has converted into an implicit protest against casteist injustices and, thereafter, a means to bring about social change. Taking into account the observation of style and tone in Dalit narrations, and the kind of message conveyed, they seem to fit into Hugo Gorringe's (2006) interpretation of 'repertoire of protest'. Dalit writing belies hegemonic narratives of economic prosperity and the achievement of democracy in India, and certainly provides a parallel narrative tradition that reveals the prevalence of casteist discrimination and Dalits' disenfranchisement. The sounds of protest and rallying cries echo out from all Dalit texts:

> Those days when we went around the village and walked with pride, the high-caste people hated our confidence. They didn't want us to enjoy any self-esteem. But we had realized that self-esteem had unusual strengths. We loathed the low esteem that was imposed on us as our lot. (Limbale, 2005: 76)

Similarly, Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* (2008) denounces the iniquitous behaviour of dominant castes in a markedly agentic and assertive tone:

> But the word 'cultured' pricked me like a thorn. What exactly did he mean? Which culture were they talking about? Whose dominance were they praising? Patriarchy? Caste system? Class? What was it? And why was our writing termed uncivilized, uncultured? How? These questions raged in my mind. (Pawar, 2008: 233)

In this vein, the transformation of Dalit aesthetics from pain to resistance, and finally to protest, though it appears to be a form of narrow identity-politics, is analogous to that of other oppressed communities everywhere. Pramod Nayar calls this the 'double-voiced' nature of atrocity narratives, explaining that, although they are located within a discursive structure

specific to a time and place —which ensures its identification— their demand for rights casts them in a universal schema of values (Nayar, 2011). Dalit life writing emerges in a national context of personal and collective suffering, and explicitly references conditions of atrocity in India. Still, it develops a notion of the human subject that can be easily and usefully integrated within multiple contexts of suffering, trauma and loss of human rights.

Nayar goes on to establish the connection between Dalits' life narratives and other marginalised writings around the world —such as African American and Aboriginal life narratives—[153] in terms of the subject-position they develop. He argues that Dalits can be aligned with similar suffering subjects worldwide, even if their suffering emerges from different contexts. He bases his allegation in that they generate abject-types —or figures of abjection occurring in trauma literatures across the world— that experience remarkably similar situations and possess replicated qualities (Nayar, 2011).

The fact that the Dalit 'difference' opens up to a form of universal difference —insofar as it is correlated to other stories and voices— can also lead to a sort of solidarity with other marginalised and disempowered communities, and thus intensified political strength. As Homi Bhabha puts it, a "minority only discovers its political force and its aesthetic form when it is articulated across and alongside communities of difference, in acts of affiliation" (Bhabha, 2004: xxii). In other words, the experience of Dalit suffering would no longer be understood as specific to the practice of untouchability or the larger social structure of caste; rather, it would be included in an extensive framework of domination and discrimination. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih have called this practice of transnational imagining a form of 'minor transnationalism', which creates cultural networks of minority cultures across national boundaries (Lionnet & Shih, 2005). The ability to imagine the Dalit subject outside the Indian context and the restrictive language of caste itself was most notably fostered in 2002, when the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination declared caste to be a form of racism, mapping it on a global structure of oppression. It is upon this map that Dalit

[153] The parallel drawn between Dalit and Aboriginal literatures is supported in that both literatures explicitly probe hegemonic ideologies and cultures from a marginalised position, and manage to make their silences 'speak'. Both Dalit and Aboriginal writers articulate the experience which, until now, was hidden, repressed and secreted by casteist and Euro-centric cultural paradigms, respectively, in search for a self- and communal identity, almost like a philosophical search for Dalitness and Aboriginality.

life narratives started to be extensively linked to other human-rights narratives and global agendas of justice.

Dalit narratives generated solidarities, especially with African American literature, through the similar content of their life narratives and comparable stolen history. Ishmael Reed, in his novel *Flight to Canada* (1976), writes: "the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away" (Reed qtd. in Gates, 2002: 1). Educated slaves were considered a threat to the institution of slavery, for education awakened them from the slumber of slavery and bondage, and raised their aspiration to escape. As an interesting parallel, it was through access to modern education that Dalit communities in India were able to fathom the despicable conditions under which they were subdued, and through which they were able to aspire to liberate themselves from centuries of oppression.[154] It is thus significant that, despite being located in different historical and geographical contexts, they have used similar tools and methods in waging a battle against discrimination.

Limbale explains that the first expressions of African American and Dalit literatures were spiritual in form, born out of their prayers for mercy (Limbale, 2004). But the literary preferences of African Americans changed over the period from the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to World War I, as W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) ignited a revolutionary consciousness against hegemonic tradition that culminated in the 1920s Harlem renaissance movement and the creation of the Black Panthers movement in the 1960s. The writers nurtured by these two movements stood up for a more realistic portrayal and a general tone of defiance in their writing. The movement generated by the Black Panthers inspired Dalit youths in India who, disappointed by India's independence aftermath and the intensification of Hindutva forces,[155] launched their own organisation in the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers. For the African American author —as for the Dalit— the project of writing is not only to confront and challenge a discriminatory past, but it also entails an initiation of a process of self-definition and identity formation. Therefore, one of the most appropriate genres for their agenda has been life writing. In their quest to comprehend and decode the epistemologies of subjugation, and

[154] Officially, Dalit and African American intellectuals and leaders never had any direct interactions, except Ambedkar and W. E. B. Du Bois' joint attempt to form an alliance against oppressive systems. On the correspondence between Ambedkar and Du Bois, see Daniel Immerwahr's "Caste or Colony?" (2007).

[155] This term was coined by V.D. Savarkar, one of the main proponents of modern, right-wing Hindu nationalism.

fight the dehumanising effects of both slavery and untouchability, they have incorporated experiences of self-suffering within a framework of emancipation and political consciousness.[156]

This comparative history of trauma and suffering across geographical and political barriers entails a risk, nonetheless, as oppression is not the same either in form or impact across the world. Pramod Nayar even alerts that such a homogenisation may erase the specificities of the local in favour of over-arching connections on the global level which, to some extent, could perpetuate the very structural inequalities that produce the suffering (Nayar, 2011). This is what Laetitia Zecchini has termed 'the dialectical tension between differentialism and universalism'; in other words, between the necessary retrieval of a delineated identity that has been systematically smothered by centuries of oppression, and the importance of holding on to a universal perspective (2018: 70).

Instead of remaining trapped within the confines of the particular and exceptional, this demonstrates that Dalit experience has often been raised to universalism which, according to Rancière (2011a), is an act of intellectual emancipation. What helped the Dalit emancipate from the shackles of literary silence and repression is autobiographical writing: the truth-telling of suffering, self-attested by damaged individuals. There is, however, a loud reproach around writing autobiographies, accusing them of being simple modes of writing, without literary value or imagination, which require no scholarship or talent. Some critics go as far as to argue that "stringing together memories incoherently" is not even a literary genre at all (Mukherjee, 2003: xxxvi). Yet for Dalits, precisely due to centuries of imposed illiteracy, autobiographies seemed the most immediate way of writing. As Sarah Beth puts it, "Early Dalit writing has been in the form of autobiography because this is the only authentic experience [Dalits] have since they have been separated from the experiences of the world" (Beth, 2007: 567). This emphasises that, at least in an early phase of this literary movement, autobiography was the only genre available to Dalits.

The accessibility and proximity of autobiographical writing eased Dalit writers' ability of self-understanding and self-representation, turning this genre into the launching pad of their literary

[156] Among the prominent slave narratives see Frederic Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass* (2004), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2001), and Booker Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1995).

careers. In the words of Beth, "The narration of one's own live has been the starting point for the literary endeavour of many Dalit writers. It allowed them to enter the literary public sphere" (Beth, 2007: 566). It provided Dalit writers with a space to regain control over the constitution and meaning of Dalit selfhood, and it granted them an identity based on narrative authority.

Within this larger trend of Dalit literary assertion, autobiography has thus been one of its most important genres. It is important to stress, however, that Dalit autobiography does not have the same essence as westernised autobiographies. One of the most relevant differences between the two is that, in the field of Dalit writing, the significance of autobiographical writing has moved beyond the literary, from descriptive testimonies that elaborate on the material hardships of exploited existences, to politically charged social narratives with characters drawn starkly as symbols of a Dalit political awakening. As 'texts of the oppressed', they have become sites of representation, resistance and contestation of the hegemonic power, thus illustrating particular ideological positions and, as such, serving an important socio-cultural function.

Emphasising that this writing proceeds from an experiential condition rather than from any particular writing ability, Pramod Nayar highlights the significance of 'performance' in Dalit autobiographies. This element, he states, consists of the staging of authenticity, where references to personal settings, personalities, and characters lend an air of reality to a context that may otherwise feel alien (Nayar, 2012). Dalit writer Laxman Mane narrates: "Whatever I lived, experienced and saw, I poured into my writing […]. If this book proves useful in initiating a social debate […] I shall feel satisfied" (Mane, 1997: 6). 'Performance' underscores, thus, the human nature of protagonists and their contexts, so that readers may grasp the extent of the horrific conditions in which the narrators lived.

Another point of divergence from westernised autobiography is Dalit autobiography's communal focus. Perceived as an actual site of power struggle where the voice of the marginalised individual raises its contestation of the hegemonic narrative in representation of his/her fellow Dalits, autobiographies serve the additional function of re-affirming and strengthening the link between individual Dalit writers and the larger Dalit community. Thus, unlike autobiographies written by famous individuals, Dalit autobiographical works are written out of a longing for communal representation rather than out of a desire for personal recognition. In fact, they are usually written by 'anonymous' individuals who emphasise the ordinariness of their life, rather than its uniqueness. This is evident in Bama's *Karukku*, in

which the village, the school or Catholic order where she becomes a nun are not named. By the same token, apart from the main character, the text does not have any character in focus; her mother, grandmother, or the rest of the women participating in the narrative are not exactly given a voice, although each of them can be said to represent different arche-types. This strategy of erasing specificities by masking them under 'a veil of anonymity' (Pandian, 1998) turns the narrative into a universal statement about oppression, a story of 'one and all' of which she is just a representative.

The significance of Dalit autobiographies lies precisely in this deconstruction of the individualistic self as the locus of autobiographical writing. As Ravi Shankar Kumar puts it, the presence of 'Dalit' in 'Dalit autobiography' cannot be reduced to the idea of self, but it is rather embedded in a general assumption of 'shared nature' of Dalit life (Kumar, 2018: 60). Sarah Beth (2015) explains that the subjects in Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as ordinary representatives whose personal accounts simultaneously become accounts of the community to which they belong, and this results in an intertwining of identities and a transference of experience. She emphasises the dynamic nature of this interconnection, arguing that the narrative focalisation jumps between the protagonist, his/her family, other Dalit friends, neighbours and the community, all bound by their identity as Dalits (Beth, 2015). This constant flux of subjectivity is visually illustrated through an alternation of personal pronouns. The fluctuation of 'I' and 'we' further collapses the boundaries between the individual and the community, thus representing personal and collective meanings of suffering and loss. In so doing, it creates an individualised voice of Dalit consciousness that oscillates between remembering and forgetting, pain and revolt, suffering and rage, unforgiveness and resignation. Consequently, each Dalit person's life partakes of the lives of all Dalits. Bama has stated that,

> The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma —of my community. […] I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages. (Bama, 2001)

Like Bama, Mane declares in his preface: "*Upara* is not alone […]. *Upara*'s success is not the success of one man, it's the success of a social movement" (Mane, 1997:14). Similarly, Limbale asserts that his work represents "the pain of millions in India" (Limbale, 2005: x).

Contrary to expectations, this metonymic nature of Dalit writing does not entail the appropriation or eclipsing of the self and the subjectivity of the Dalit under the broader 'we' of the community. Rather, Limbale argues that they assume added meanings particular to Dalit life, as they traverse through the collective terrain of Dalit experience (Limbale, 2004: 32). Thereby, individual subjectivities enrich the meaning of the collective identity and enter into dialogue with the larger Dalit community. Most interestingly, Sarah Beth purports that the protagonist's own progress as an individual —both options and obstacles that come his/her way— is largely affected or directly affects the progress of the Dalit community as a whole (Beth, 2015). Lakshmi Holmström states that although *Karukku* is written out of a specific experience —that of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman— "it has a universality at its core which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies" (Holmström, 2014b: xiv). Holmström terms it 'autobiography of a community', as the conglomeration of events and life-narratives get strewn in a tapestry of Dalit collective experience (2014a). This recurrent interspersion of individuality and collectivity in Dalit autobiographies has prompted many critics to refer to them as 'community manifestos' (Kumar, 2010: 229). In fact, Mini Krishnan in the Editor's Note to *Karukku* describes it as "part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto" (Krishnan, 2014: xxv).

Thus, Dalit autobiographies might seem, in a superficial reading, simple autobiographies that count the day-to-day existential ordeal of a Dalit individual and his/her next of kin. But, when the surface is scratched, the deeper layers imbued with political programmes and visions for emancipation from a mass identity slowly emerge and become decipherable. Along with counting personal trials and tribulations, these texts also embark on a journey towards forging a common identity, which will ultimately lead towards emancipation.

This strong connection between the individual and the community is also based on a shared ecological burden of living and suffering within a spatial caste system. Dalits have their own environmental thought —mythological, anecdotal, theoretical, and rational— conditioned by their surroundings, and this gets reflected on their writings. Rob Nixon (2005) has termed this 'bioregional writing'. In tune with this, Pramod Nayar has referred to Dalit writings as 'auto/ethnographies', and has theorised that they develop a specific set of narrative devices, that he calls 'eco-tropics' charged with a historical and spatial specificity (Nayar, 2013). He defines them as tropes rooted in the land and local culture, visible in terms of suffering, fear

and loss, labour, and community, carrying a distinct geographical tinge (292). These 'eco-tropics', he argues, help produce a larger semiotic universe of social protest; that is, a larger context of shared spatially-plotted representations within which individual narratives and representations can make sense to the reader. For instance, Bama's text reflects individual's situationality in a particular community rooted in Tamil Nadu, while Kandasamy's text is based on a particular massacre in the Kilvenmani village from Tamil Nadu, and Bagul depicts different scenarios from Marathi reality. The importance of place is such in Dalit writings that many writers have described the influence their *jati* had on them: "In the maharwada of Veergaon, I behaved as if the locality was my personal property. […] All those fifteen or sixteen houses in our maharwada were like family to me" (Kamble, 2008: 7).

Y. B. Satyanarayana acknowledges the constitutive role of space —or the experience of growing up in a Dalit *basti* or *jati mohalla*— in the formation of Dalit consciousness and mobilisation among many Dalit writers (Satyanarayana, 2011: 2). Authors locate their experience of caste in the spatial markings that define their neighbourhoods. Satyanarayana was particularly interested in showing that it is "everyday experience" that has shaped "the literary and activist writings and academic scholarship of Dalits" (2). He goes on to say that the references to everyday experiences of living in *jati mohallas* is what underscores the view that caste is a source of everyday discrimination, brutal forms of violence, dehumanisation, and inequality, which belies any notion of 'caste-free' society (2). Besides, the conscious foregrounding of the individual and the community's connections with the ecosystem and the specificity of this kind of detail contributes to the 'truth effect' of the narrative, thus reinforcing its authenticity and rooting the story in a specific region. 'Growing up untouchable' in a *jati mohalla* has imprisoned Dalits' consciousness, but it has also shaped their activism.

Given the heterogeneous subject matter —and the eclectic subjectivity— in Dalit autobiographies, many critics prefer to use the term 'life narratives' on account of its inclusive nature. 'Life writing' includes genres as diverse as autobiographies, autofictions, and confessional forms such as diaries, journals, *Bildungsromane* and biomythography (Henke, 1998). Yet, other critics purport that Dalit life writing folds the atrocity narrative into evidentiary statements that are explicitly political. They argue, then, that terming their narrative mode 'autobiography' or even 'life writing' is inadequate, as it fails to capture the various dimensions of such writing. Sharmila Rege has a similar take on this as she argues: "Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual

and provide the context explicit or implicit for the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, caste struggle and resistance" (Rege, 2006: 13). Contrasting with Rege's resolution, in the Afterword to *The Prisons We Broke*, Gopal Guru argues that, although many critics have favoured testimonies against autobiographies due to the strong link between individuality and the latter, this definition is problematic because of its legal connotation. By referring to them as 'testimonies' they would be transformed into a pleading mode for someone to judge their accuracy. He argues then that the only appropriate context to consider them testimonies is if we consider them to be personal statements of protest against their exclusion from society (Guru, 2008: 158). Taking this into account, some scholars —like Pandian (1998) and Nayar (2006)—prefer to use the notion of '*testimonio*' when referring to Dalits' writing. *Testimonio* is defined as "a novel or novella-length book […] told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a […] 'significant life experience'" (Beverley, 1992: 92).

The main distinction between *testimonios* and testimonies is the level of self-consciousness and the desire for change: when a narrator uses the text as a tool for denunciation and protest, it corresponds with *testimonios*; when a rather neutral and uncritical tone is adopted in the narrative, it remains a testimony (De Heering, 2018). As such, many subaltern writers may show a nascent consciousness of the inequality of their situation, but resilience regularly overtakes denunciation. On the other hand, *testimonio* encloses the idea of "[telling] the unofficial story, [constructing] a history of people, of individual lives, a history not of those in power, but by those confronted by power, and becoming empowered" (Perks & Thomson, 2006: 502). Thus, *testimonios* can be summarised as subaltern narratives articulating life experiences, but encompassing a strong sense of agency. As Sharmila Rege puts it, the sociological and activist import of Dalit *testimonio* lies in the fact that,

> In a *testimonio*, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation. (Rege, 2006: 13; emphasis in the original)

Like *testimonio*, Dalit writings are narratives that reveal the structure of traumatic experience while also gesturing at the ways in which the victims have fought, overcome and survived the

event. They not only document trauma, but also expose strategies of survival and encourage the re-construction of the self after the traumatic event.

A simple normativisation of Dalit literature as autobiographical does not capture, therefore, the diversity of Dalit articulations. However, because of the realist drive in which Dalit literatures have been engaged, they have seemingly privileged the genre of autobiography for a literature whose urgency was to be, first and foremost, testimonial. Works of imagination and artistic experimentation in the shape of poetry, drama or fiction must have been perceived as having a lesser political impact and a reduced authenticity with regard to Dalit reality.

Birth-mark, Speech-mark?

Without doubt, Dalit writers had to fight for their right to speak. Consequently, they felt the need to redefine the boundaries of their representation, and to reclaim and secure narrative authority over the construction of the 'Dalit self' by putting an emphasis on the 'authentic Dalit experience'. They consider it necessary to stress that their literary productions are not simply life writings, but they symbolise a process of 'self-emancipation' and political assertion, and that they seek to create a 'dissident space' within the public hegemonic sphere. As Brueck explains,

> Dalit authors, no longer content to be represented by others, have turned a critical eye to mainstream literature that claims to speak from a Dalit perspective. No longer wanting to be limited to being looked upon as objects of sympathy, revulsion, or desire, [they] have embraced the call of Ambedkar to not only intimately reveal the 'pain and sorrow' of Dalit lives but also, more significantly, to 'bring progress'. (Brueck, 2014: 83)

They have sought to invalidate the claim to their representation of the élite Indian authors stressing that "only a Dalit by birth can have the sensitivity and experience to be a genuine Dalit writer" (Kumar, 2010: 147). Limbale famously conceptualised Dalit literature as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale 2004: 19), circumscribing thus the appropriate form, content, and authorship for Dalit writings. Taken at face value, the definition seems to perform almost a mirror-like inversion of the exclusionary caste structure

by pitting Dalits against upper castes and, in the process, shaping Dalit literature solely as a project of self-assertion against hegemonic misrepresentations.

Given the discursive mechanisms of silencing Dalit voices in the public sphere, it is not surprising that Dalit writers choose to write with the specific purpose of reclaiming their right to literature through self-representation. This is what Aniket Jaaware has termed the 'birth-mark/speech-mark' correlation, according to which only those who are born as Dalits have the right to speak (Jaaware, 2001: 272), which thus demarcated the notion of authenticity. 'Authenticity' refers to the subject position of the author of a Dalit text, whether or not that author's life experience provides him/her with adequate tools to represent the Dalit perspective 'realistically', and whether or not a non-Dalit writer can genuinely represent them.

Most Dalits continue to see the privilege of authoritative discourse as belonging solely to Dalits, and fiercely protect their alternative counterpublic against dilution. Yet, the inclusion in the Dalit literary body of only those writings produced by Dalit-born writers is an essentialist approach that entails that one's origin determines one's agenda. Thus, just as there is some danger in uncritically embracing non-Dalit writers, there is an equal danger in readily rejecting them. One of the most evident risks of this exclusivism is that Dalit writers may be heading towards isolation and the radicalisation of their literary sphere, limiting others' access to it and also reducing its integrative and transformative possibilities. Furthermore, Dalits' claimed 'differentialism' could culminate in aporia by perpetually legitimising the object of the struggle itself —the hierarchical system of inequality— and getting obsessed over reinforcing a distinctive 'difference' (Zecchini, 2018: 83). This is what Saïd has termed 'possessive exclusivism', against which he advises not to police the territory of representation (Saïd, 2003). Other critics argue that the basis of Dalit literature does not lie in one's birth in a particular caste, but rather in its social consciousness (Phadkule, 1986: 37; Kurundkar, 1981: 96-7). Literary critic Mohammad Azhar Dherivala teams with this rather inclusive perspective and suggests that an expansion of it could, in fact, uncover supportive representations:

> By dividing contemporary authors, writers, and poets into 'Dalit writers' and 'non-Dalit writers,' we are not only divisive but also appear to have an agenda. If these arbitrary divisions continue, then a specific meaning of 'Dalit consciousness' will be accepted as tied to a specific class. (Dherivala qtd. in Brueck, 2014: 52)

Interestingly enough, despite his initial radical postulation regarding the authorship of Dalit literature, Limbale acknowledges an established narrowness in the focus of Dalit writers and admits that the discussion of Dalit literature actually survives due to the writings of non-Dalit critics (Limbale, 2004: 112-13). This surprising stand in Limbale clearly points to the limits in Dalit literature and to the need to expand it.

Marginalised within the Margins

Gendered Essentialist Representation

As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "Representation legimitizes and privileges certain kinds of knowledge" (Hutcheon, 1988: 53-4). Undoubtedly, the dynamics of literary assertion previously laid bare delineates a mainstream Dalit literature around which a trend has been developed of looking at it in unitary terms, as a ubiquitous and homogenous phenomenon. However, a simplistic interpretation of the 'difference' of Dalit writing from more mainstream literary categories is not at all reflective of its nuanced, complex and diverse literary reality. The Dalit identity does not constitute a homogenous or unified identity, neither now, nor in the past. Postmodern thinking has criticised this tendency "to write hypercoherent accounts of fundamentally messy societies, cultures, and events", and to "construct actors as coherent unitary subjects and agents with coherent unitary purposes and desires" (Ortner, 1991: 4-5). When discussing caste in India, the mistaking of a part for the whole is highly problematic and oblivious. As Sarah Beth contends, no individual can truly represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community s/he claims to represent (Beth, 2015). There exists a plurality of voices, life experiences, and perspectives that often find themselves at odds with one another when trying to fulfil the demands of a mainstream audience for a recognisable, 'authentic' and even 'digestible' Dalit literary voice. The assumptions of gender neutrality in Dalit writing have rendered Dalit women largely invisible, leading to depictions of Dalits as a predominantly male category. This demonstrates that there are fissures in this field, not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of gender.

Not much attention has been paid to the historical specificities and material conditions around the interaction of caste with gender in negotiating Dalit boundaries. Female Dalit voices decry

a double or even triple oppression within the patriarchal structures of casteist society, as well as within their own communities and homes, which underscores Dalit literature's narrow scope. At the same time, it calls for a widening of perspective that would account for multiple realities. Laura Brueck states that this dismissiveness is seemingly wilful as part of a strategic campaign to protect the boundaries of Dalit literature from dissimulation into multiple, individual authorial approaches that could reduce their unified political impact (Brueck, 2014: 7). In privileging a monolithic image of the 'Dalit selfhood', inner conflicts and divisions have been perceived as counter-productive to the larger movement, and have often been silenced. One such instance of silence and elision is the question of Dalit women.

From a general observation of Dalit writings, as well as the Dalit social sphere, one can appreciate a largely male-centric orientation. They concentrate on the efforts of Dalit men, diminishing or even excluding women's actions and aspirations. The proportion of representation of Dalit women's predicament in the works of male writers is insignificant. There abound only passing references to the ordeals endured by their womenfolk or, as Gopal Guru bluntly puts it, Dalit women make "only a guest appearance" in them (Guru, 2008: 160). In *Joothan* (2003), except for very brief mentions, the inner feelings and the problems faced by women are not represented. Valmiki's wife, for instance, is hardly mentioned, and no insights into her own reasoning are given, except when talking about the marriage proposal — and, even then, she is silenced. Guru explains this attitude arguing that it is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event (Guru, 1995). He adds that Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them (1995).

In addition to the generalised absence of Dalit women in Dalit writings, when they do get represented, it is done inadequately. In Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables* the predicament of Dalit women is expressed only in the chapters narrated by Sonu. However, even in those chapters, her husband's principles, beliefs and struggles are more dealt with than hers. Moreover, Sonu —and by extension, the general Dalit woman— is depicted as taking a more backward-thinking stance than her male counterpart:

> I could not understand what was so bad about taking our turn as Yeskar. […] After all, scores of generations had done this duty; what was making him so angry? […]

> I had not understood why he was not willing to conform to tradition. (Jadhav, 2005: 31-3)

Given the importance that the figure of Ambedkar has acquired for Dalits and their assertion movement, the most striking aspect of Sonu's portrayal is her blatant indifference towards him, which highlights the level of regression of her state of mind:

> My husband dragged me along with him to these lectures. 'Soney, take more interest in these talks instead of the song and dance you like to see. They are about our community and about the uplifting of our people.' I thought, even in our village, we had lived among the Mahars and no one had ever questioned the age-old system. […] Sometimes, I got bored when he talked endlessly about Babasaheb's speeches. Of course, I dutifully followed him, but secretly I told myself, 'It is enough to have that social ghost sitting on my husband's head… I am better off without it'. (146-47)

Dalit male writers —and Indian male writers in general— have tended to present a distorted image of Dalit women, from polluting to victimised and from lascivious to vulnerable individuals (Kumar, 2010: 219),[157] or to romanticise them through their depiction in stereotyped female roles, such as those of sacrificing wives and mothers (Lokhande qtd. in Rege, 2006: 74-5). The quotidian depiction of Dalit women as victims has concealed deep structures of inequality, and has helped maintaining the hegemonic and hierarchical caste order. "Representations in print", to quote Rancière, are often "embodied allegories of inequality" (Rancière, 2009: 12). Dalit women have been framed in iconographies of sentimentality, sympathy and subservience, and narrated in condescending language. Such is the case of Banoo, the Mahar woman in Bagul's first short story "Prisoner of Darkness" (Bagul, 2018: 13), who is accused by the entire orthodox village of all the ill fortunes happening in the high-caste family she married into, only because of her caste and, of course, gender.

[157] Uma Chakravarti demonstrates how repetitive negative images of Dalit women had their roots in ancient cultural traditions such as *Manusmriti*, *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, in which Dalit women were often depicted as vulgar, treacherous, dangerous, polluted and evil (Chakravarti, 2003).

Apart from silent —and silenced— victims, Dalit women have frequently been discursively constructed as victims of rape and sexual violence at the hands of both upper-caste and Dalit men, on account of their body and beauty (Bagul, 2018: 13). This has undoubtedly added to the generalised denial of their subjectivity and political agency. Brueck points out a normative masculinist tendency in the employment of a 'rape script', or a discursive determinism of sexual violence, as singularly defining the experience of Dalit womanhood (Brueck, 2014:19). In this narrative tendency, female Dalit bodies have been depicted as readily available for their fellow Dalit men, but have also been appropriated by upper-caste men as a way to emasculate and control Dalit men. This, apart from reducing Dalit women to a hyper-symbolic state of victimhood through images of collective violence, customary access, and expropriation of women's bodies, has also rendered them impure and lacking in virtue. Their bodies are thus seen as collectively mute, and capable of bearing penetration. Brueck further denounces that these writings have legitimated rape and other forms of sexual assault in casteist society, and have predicated men as the subjects and operators of violence, while rendering women as the objects of it (159). Another interesting aspect that Brueck notices about these 'rape scripts' is that atrocities of this kind are often placed as a starting point of a story or an episode. By following this structure, the event works as a catalyst to drive the story towards the male agents' struggle to obtain justice and revolt against the upper-caste oppressors. Consequently, "The victimized women have little voice and are often left by the wayside as the narrative focus turns toward the male agents of the recuperation of honour" (Brueck, 2012: 230). In such narratives, male authors speak on behalf of women, depriving them of autonomy and agency.

Devaluation and vulnerability, together with spectatorial pity mingled with charitable benevolence, became a cornerstone in the representation of Dalit women. Their capacity for agency, criticality and ingenuity was systematically undermined, leaving them as subjects to be acted upon; to be written, thought, and talked about. This demonstrates that caste is undoubtedly gendered, as gender has been an added qualifier to it.

The failure of anti-caste rhetoric to comprehend the gender question was mirrored by the ineffective attempt undertaken by the Indian feminist movement. The feminist movement, developed in the 1970s and led in India by upper-caste females, raised issues related to domestic violence, dowry, and unequal wages; all of them focusing on the experiences of whiter, educated, upper/middle-caste women (Rege, 2003: 90). By considering this type of woman as normative, the Indian feminist movement focused only on issues related to her, and

thus failed to engage with the problems that women from lower castes encounter.[158] As Guru puts it,

> People in positions of privilege, who enjoy the hierarchical structures of the society for enhancing their life, willingly or unwillingly, cannot fathom the experience of loss of power and agency by those marginalised; unless the structures are broken or overturned. Individual feminists 'transforming' themselves won't affect the larger structures which will continue to perpetuate oppression. (Guru, 2005a: 64)

This movement glossed over caste and class differences in the pursuance of a monolithic Indian feminism, making gender oppression the basis of a 'natural' bond between different women, side-lining or even ignoring Dalit women's specific predicaments. These 'mainstream' feminists simply assumed they can speak for Dalit women, and adopted a wronged and narrow strategy to resolve the 'untouchable female question' by introducing reforms from above and attempting to 'sanitise' them. In this respect, the references to womanhood remained coded in upper-caste frames. In the words of Chandra Mohanty,

> The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (Mohanty, 1988: 64)

This is simply not the case because class, caste, race, ethnicity, and religion are all paradigms that cannot be ignored. By articulating the concerns of upper-caste women as the problems of 'all' women, Indian feminist movements lacked a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting character of caste and gender, or its outcomes, and thus failed to give adequate and equal space to the role of caste in gendered relations.

Dalit women have therefore been claimed by both Dalit and feminist movements across India, each demanding a de-emphasis on one aspect of their identity —gender or caste. Their voices

[158] The feminist movement in India has often colluded with forces of the right in excluding Dalits, and occluding the oppression of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular (Tharu & Niranjana, 1996). Sharmila Rege further argues that left-based women's organisations highlighted economic and work-related issues and subsumed caste under class. Moreover, autonomous women's organisations politicised violence against women, but considered the notion of 'sisterhood' pivotal, thereby side-lining issues related to caste (Rege, 2003).

have been lost in the hegemonic rhetoric of both movements, claiming either to speak on behalf of Dalit women or all women, respectively. The need was felt by women imbued with Dalit consciousness to represent their perspectives and lived experience in a genuine manner, to make a creative use of their marginality from their 'outsider-within' status.[159] On the basis of these factors, in 1995, an autonomous organisation known as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) emerged.[160] Drawing from the formation of the NFDW, Guru opened the debate on the use of 'difference' for a Dalit feminist, suggesting that Dalit women go through a 'differential experience' shaped by the contradictions between them and upper-caste women, as well as the patriarchal domination within Dalit communities (Guru, 1995). There is, therefore, a 'politics of difference' that structures the articulation of the specificity of Dalit women's lives. Their sexuality, political awareness, self-assertion, experience of profession, violence, and suffering within the community justify their need to speak differently.

Dalit women writers' voices have emerged relatively late in the written literary traditions, but that does not preclude them from being articulate and forceful. As is the case of the rest of Dalit literature, life narratives have become a discursive arena for Dalit women, permitting them to represent themselves and tell their suffering from their own perspective. Sharmila Rege calls this the 'Dalit feminist standpoint' that takes into account, in short, the multi-layered problems and identities of Dalit women, which are at the intersection of gender, caste and ethnicity (Rege, 1998: 45). She argues that Dalit feminism differs from Indian mainstream feminism in its demands and adds female emancipation to the Dalit movement, concluding that the artistic and literary representations of Dalit feminism cannot be accommodated within either of these two conventional forms.

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[159] The term 'outsider-within' was first coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), and designates a special space of the experiencer made by his/her 'difference' or unique standpoint. 'Outsider-within' status was captured by bell hooks while giving an account of her small-town Kentucky childhood: "living as we did —on the edge— we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out […] we understood both" (hooks, 1984: vii). Their difference makes them conscious of patterns or social constructions that may be beyond the comprehension or sight of sociological insiders.

[160] The NFDW was formed as the result of a process that began in 1987 with a national consultation on the struggles and aspirations of Dalit women in Bangalore and then in Delhi and Pune. Several other groups, such as the All India Dalit Women's Forum, were also formed in the 1990s and, in recent years, the Dalit women question has also received international attention through the United Nations Conference against All Forms of Racism attesting to a forceful Dalit women contingent. The basis of the formation —and proliferation— of these autonomous groups was the argument that Dalit women were invisible, both in the women's movement and in the Dalit movement, because of which Dalit women needed a separate platform to forge their own identity and find solutions to their problems (Guru, 1995).

Laura Brueck agrees with Rege on the Dalit female need to move beyond hegemonic and Dalit male writers' representations, especially in the case of the 'rape script'. Brueck brings to the fore the necessity to reconsider the ever-present threat of sexual violence as part of Dalit women's identities, and to contest the narrative determinism behind it. She advocates a feminist recuperation of the misogynistic and casteist rape narrative that she labels as 'rescripting rape' (Brueck, 2014: 58); a sort of revenge narrative that would complicate and even rewrite the casteist rape script. Against the treatment of rape as a merely a structural aspect in the narrative with the explicit mission to emphasise casteist oppression, this 'rescripting rape' narrative would focus on the sexual exploitation and eventual violent reprisal towards the woman, thus creating a woman-centred rape revenge. Moreover, it would disrupt the normative social script of sexual assault and the physically passive role prescribed to Dalit women. Such disruption of the casteist rape script is on display in "Mangali" (1997) by female Dalit writer Kusum Meghwal.

Instead of dwelling on victimhood, Meghwal reinserts women's subjectivity depicting their resistance. Throughout the story, the protagonist, Mangali, plays the stereotypical role of the embattled Dalit woman, struggling against poverty, exploitative labour conditions, and dealing with the ubiquitous threat of sexual assault. After the death of her husband, she becomes an even more obvious target for social and sexual exploitation, which points to the inevitability of her misery. But Mangali surprises the audience and emerges as a woman who is able to assert her dominant subjectivity, which culminates in her display of physical strength: after ongoing harassment from her landlord, she ultimately gathers the courage to knock him out with a single blow. Through this 'fantasy revenge' that seeks to de-centre rape as constitutive of Dalit female identity, Meghwal aims at restoring Dalit women's subjectivity and agency, and enables a cathartic release of their repressed anger. While in the typical —and typically male-authored— Dalit rape text, a Dalit woman is raped or brutalised, very often in a public space, near the beginning of the story and, immediately after it, the victim's male family seeks justice and leaves the woman by the wayside, in "Mangali" female characters serve as the loci of resistance; they seek retaliation themselves, and readily subvert the logic on which the rape script operates.

Thus, apart from documenting the plight of the women in their community, their everyday struggle to earn their livelihood and their ethos, Dalit women writers are also developing, in the course of their weave, alternative expressive spaces where they can voice resistance and re-

imagine the representative norm; as was argued before, nowhere is this more evident than in literary representations of rape and sexual assault against Dalit women. Their aim is to rescue female Dalit bodies from passive manipulations, and build alternative feminist agentic imaginings.

Dalit women's writings present a narrative of survival where issues of identity, community, casteism and patriarchy are disclosed. They testify to the mechanisms of power both among the powerful and the powerless. Although Urmila Pawar does not display a radical rejection of social structures or institutions in her text *The Weave of My Life* (2008), she does suggest that women have a role to play in revising and reshaping unjust social practices that affect their everyday realities. She symbolically parallels her mother's basket-weaving to her intellectual labour of writing, and captures this powerful link between the older generation's way of resistance and the new one's in the title, *The Weave of My Life*:

> *Aaydan* is the generic term used for all things made from bamboo […]. My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us. (Pawar, 2008: x)

She candidly provides insight into the tensions her literary aspirations and social involvements brought to her family, but moves away from the individual focus and portrays the Dalit woman in its multiplicity. Putting her own subjectivity at a second level, she informs about the Dalit woman's daily concerns: the redefinition of Dalit women's roles in post-independence India, the effects of conversion, the memories of 'gendered untouchability' as well as its continued practice in differing forms, Dalit women's relationships with other women, Dalit men, and family, as well as workplace issues and activism.

Resistance is also creatively articulated in Dalit women's writings as an everyday resilience against daily casteism and oppression. Potentially mistaken with an indifferent stance towards hardships —or an attitude of accepting life as it is— Dalit women have learned through life-long experience that they cannot control their milieu; but they certainly can control their individual actions. They have learned to use their instincts and their abilities to uncover ways so as to silently thwart the system. Bama's *Sangati*, for instance, is not only a revelation of the bitter reality of the social ills that Dalit women confront; it also brings to light their inner

strength and vigour. The narrative abounds with stories of Dalit women who had the resilience and strength to negotiate their existence in a male-dominated society. It illustrates that even uneducated Dalit women working as field labourers have cunningly created ways of interpreting and asserting their identities. They refuse to be consigned to a state of hopelessness; instead, they strive to persevere: "our women have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best ways we can" (2008: 68). Bama demonstrates through her text that, while some women endure the sufferings patiently, many others show perseverance and resistance, and even find new ways of coping with their wretched existence.

Rather than focusing on describing and analysing victimhood, most female Dalit writings, such as Bama's, shed light on the political engagement and agency of Dalit women. While Pawar considers it significant to voice the trials and tribulations of Dalit women, she also depicts them as agents in bringing about change, both in their own lives and in the lives of other Dalit women. Her mother, despite being a widow, would string together *aaydans* not only to make ends meet, but also to make sure that her children would get educated. She is adamant about it, and is ready to confront all those who pose impediments in the way of their progress: "I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better" (Pawar, 2008: 69).

Both Bama and Pawar show that Dalit women are far from being 'silent subjects' at the receiving end of humiliation. Instead, we see the emergence of a subject with critical agency who speaks up, writes out and confronts outright (Guru, 2009: 5). In fact, Sharmila Rege contends that it is precisely in the act of writing against humiliation that the active socio-political subjectivity and agency of Dalit women assume a concrete form (Rege, 2006: 13). They demonstrate that the new generation of Dalit women is not willing to suffer as their elder generations did for hundreds of years. Bela Malik writes that "the younger women [are] most militant and less willing to tolerate the terms of their existence" (Malik, 2005: 102); their epitome is Meena Kandasamy. She is removed from the mainstream social paradigm for being a female, a Dalit and a Tamil, but she compensates it all with the gift of her prose. The language is a tool at her disposal, and she uses it to defend as well as to attack. In her bold novel *The Gypsy Goddess* she lays out specific problems encountered by Dalit women, but she makes sure that their resilience and their role in the fight for dignity and freedom is also highlighted. The women she portrays dare to defy their oppressors, even at the risk of their own lives.

Considering this mixture of resilience and defiance, Tabish Khair postulates that female Dalit writings should be read as covert or overt gestures of subversion (Khair, 2001: 178). This subversion is not only ideological, but also corporeal in nature. In contrast to the traditional image of Indian womanhood that supposedly upholds values such as modesty and shyness, Bama showcases a different kind of women that is independent, courageous and straightforward. In *Sangati*, Dalit women resort to strong expletives in order to escape the brutal assaults on their bodies caused by their husband. Raakkamma, a female Dalit character in *Sangati*, uses language as a weapon to shame her husband, Paakkiaraj. The fight between them, although originated at home, unfolds in the middle of the street, when they are surrounded by other village people that gathered to watch the spectacle. Raakkamma shouts:

> How dare you kick me, you low-life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? (Bama, 2008: 61)

After the slur, Raakkamma resorts to socially unacceptable sexual behaviour and she lifts up her sari in front of the whole crowd, making her husband move away from her and run. Knowing that her behaviour is scandalous, she retorts angrily: "If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man" (62).

Dalit women use, thus, the limited material at their disposal to subvert hierarchies of gender and caste, turning the logic of subjugation back on their tormenters. In response to regulations and assumptions imposed on their bodies that render them polluted, Dalit women convert their 'polluting' bodies into sharp weapons that help protect themselves from domestic violence, both verbal and physical. Female Dalit writers include many aspects of their lives that are absent from men's autobiographies, such as the experiences of menstruation, female sexual desire, and gendered violence, as instruments in their claim for a rightful social and narrative space. Moreover, in using their bodies as narrative weapons they contradict the paternalist conception that links women with the emotional and bodily, and therefore devalue their rational and intellectual capacities. These writers vividly demonstrate their ability to craft intellectual

productions, as women and as Dalits, and they do so without erasing their bodily and emotional experiences; precisely the contrary, they make sure to emphasise them.

The mark of feminism in the voice and ideas of these writers is evident as most of the women portrayed in *Karukku, Sangati*, *The Gypsy Goddess, The Weave of my Life*, and *The Prisons We Broke* are unmistakably feminist —without using or knowing the term— in their rebellions and support for each other. Their writings not only address the lacunae in the literary tradition of feminist representation in Indian writing, but also transcend the stereotype of 'narrative of pain and suffering' that has come to be associated with Dalit writing. The bodies and experiences of Dalit women that have been marginalised and obliterated in the domain of mainstream Dalit literature, are now repositioned right at the centre, together with a strong collective affirmative stance.

Creamy Layer

Nancy Fraser acknowledges that the collective consciousness within a social field of exploitation and domination is necessarily self-alienating (Fraser, 1990). Similarly, in the Dalits' case, anyone who has not subscribed to the normative demands of exhibiting a carefully defined Dalit *chetna* has been excluded from the public persona of the Dalit literary sphere. Thus, just as Dalit *chetna* has failed to adequately represent the alternative concerns of Dalit women, it has equally disregarded the identity and consciousness of those materially advantaged, middle and upper/middle-class Dalits, whom Dalit journalist Chandrabhan Prasad calls the 'Dalit bourgeoisie' (Prasad, 2005).

Over the years, due to the educational accessibility and the economical betterment of low castes, a thin class-like layer of an economically better-off group has formed among Dalits. Those in this layer —also labelled as 'creamy layer'— are testimonial to the social change that has occurred in India over the last decades. But their distinct state of affairs from the average Dalit population as regards a variety of dimensions —economically, educationally, culturally, and spatially— has also granted them the ironic epithet of 'Dalit Brahmin'. According to Gopal Guru, a Dalit Brahmin is "a modernist Dalit who has developed a detached, disengaged view of his/her community and turned his/her back on it" (Guru, 2000: 127).

Having transcended the oppressions of caste through mobility, many claim that 'ex-untouchables' distance themselves from the authentic Dalit experience, both deliberately and systematically. Dalit writers, for instance, are generally well-educated, they have left their villages and moved away from the menial work of their ancestors, and most of them share a comprehensive understanding of various cultural, social and political issues. In contrast, village people have remained generally poor and their exposure to social, political and activist issues is still very limited today. In other words, while Dalit writers are the comparative minority of Dalits who were able to get an education and have taken a step outside traditional caste oppressions, the vast majority of Dalits still languish at the lowest socio-economic and cultural level of the Indian society. Consequently, many claim that these middle-class Dalit writers are not true representatives of the poor Dalits, as only authentic victims of untouchability can speak about it. Kamble warns the affluent who have become forgetful of their less fortunate fellows:

> Remember, what you are today is solely because of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. This life of luxury has been possible for you because of him. But for him, you would have had to spend your life in some hut with earthen pots. You would have been begging around for food, and biting into carcasses to fight the pangs of hunger. (Kamble, 2008: 123)

This testifies to the 'ambivalence of belonging' that these middle-class Dalit writers experience. Their ambivalence arises from the tension between producing a truthful embodiment of caste on the one hand, and their estranged standpoint and altered self-conception on the other. Thus, they struggle to find a 'fine balance' between a 'proximity to' and 'distance from' Dalit *chetna* in their literary expressions, which may develop into a feeling of alienation. Y. B. Satyanarayana in *My Father Baliah* illustrates this feeling of estrangement by narrating that, unlike other Dalit families, his family actually lived a comfortable life. He argues that there was no struggle for food, shelter and clothing in his household, and education was feasible for them. He acknowledges, though, that these aspects alienated them from their own community in the village (Satyanarayana, 2011: 29).

Paradoxically then, these middle-class Dalit writers feel significantly distanced from their caste community, which they have left behind in the village, but at the same time continue to experience oppression and obstruction on account of their caste identity. Many Dalit writers in this position have been unable to resolve the dilemma posed by their status, and continue to

struggle to fit their narratives of modern alienation and crises of identity into the rubric of Dalit literature of sheer atrocity and exploitation. Speaking on behalf of the 'oppressed masses', these writers construct their own self-image as against a reified and stereotyped 'Dalit Other'. The effect is that they create a homogeneous representation which compounds the social differentiation within the Dalit category, possibly contributing to reproducing and keeping alive the image of the Dalit as a permanently poor and oppressed figure.

Motivated by a solidarity sparked and sustained by his own past experiences of discrimination and exclusion, Ajay Navaria has positioned himself right in the middle of the dynamics of contemporary caste politics. His 'in-between' stance enables him to move between the modern and the traditional, the urban and the rural, the forward and the backward, and to convey meanings across these divisions. Nevertheless, his work has garnered criticism for straying too far from the approved themes of community struggle and Ambedkarite philosophy, as well as for writing prose that is too 'difficult' for an uneducated Dalit audience. He subtly challenges many of the prescribed aesthetic and thematic norms of Dalit literature, such as portraying characters that are true individuals rather than archetypes of an entire community, and that often undergo psychological transformations in the course of the narrative. His stories can be read as narratives of alienation, accounts of complex negotiations with the modern, and reflections on the widening gap between urban and rural spaces in India. His authorial voice makes it clear that the journey of many newly urbanised Dalits from village to city, from feudal caste hierarchies to the pseudo-equality of a secular modernity, is actually fraught with difficulty and conflict.

One such example of alienation from oneself and one's community is his short story *Upmahadvi* ("Subcontinent") (2004). The narrative consists of two major individual flashback episodes, woven within the main plot. The protagonist, Siddharth, is a Dalit who has moved from the countryside to Delhi. At the beginning of the story, he is depicted in his Delhi flat, in the late evening, surrounded by a potent description of the sun setting. In the two flashbacks that follow, Sidharth remembers his childhood and then his adolescence, both set in his childhood village. Memories of verbal and physical assaults disrupt his peaceful present.

Throughout the narrative, however, the flawed equality between individuals in modern India, and the persistent marked citizenship of the 'modern' man is brought to light. Though the protagonist —and other Dalit workers in his office— does not suffer physical discrimination

and oppression on account of his caste status anymore, he is regularly taunted by his co-workers for having achieved his position due to the quota system. Feeling isolated and reviled in his government job, Siddharth is aware of the precariousness of his ‘enforced’ equality, and the discrimination and religiously-justified prejudice that still lurks. As Laura Brueck puts it, his constant slipping back into the past does not evidence a desire to be elsewhere, to be back in his village, but rather an inability to fully escape it (Brueck, 2014: 136). The fact that Siddharth continues to be bounded by caste and fettered by prejudice, despite having moved to a ‘caste-blind’ secular city, makes him develop a feeling of alienation and liminality: he is unable to fully participate in the present until the atrocities of his rural past are resolved. He is not a casteless citizen yet, nor an ‘authentic Dalit’ anymore.

The feeling of alienation in modern and urban Dalits is also underscored through Navaria’s skilful use of heteroglossic registers. The writer plays with language in his stories, manipulating deeply entrenched social connotations of English. An example comes from his story “Yes Sir” (2012) in which Navaria employs a condescending dialogical exchange over the use of English. Contrary to previous depictions of the use of English in Dalit literature, the elitist register in this case does not belong to the caste Hindu character, but to the Dalit Narottam. Ironically thus, the one empowered to wield it is the one who has historically been kept away from it, while the caste Hindu Tivari is portrayed as rustic and linguistically ignorant. Navaria’s narrative strategy, thus, opposes readers’ expectations as constructed by the existing linguistic hierarchies in India, and seeks to shock and subvert the pre-established linguistic and dialogical conventions around Dalit literature.

Navaria, and many other Dalit writers who feel haunted by this feeling of alienation and physical and ideological distance, use their texts not only to perpetuate Dalit *chetna* but also in an attempt to re-establish or mend the link between the middle-class Dalit individual and the general Dalit community. Additionally, they intend to incorporate alienation and the crisis of identity as constituents of Dalit subjectivity, as well as to lay bare the hollow rhetoric of modernity and secular foundations, and the pseudo-equality they bring about in India. Therefore, they argue that the literal and figurative distance from village to city, the ideological, psychological, and emotional distance between those who have made the journey and those who have not, and the personal and familial bereavement that accompany Dalit political awakening must all be part of the contemporary Dalit literature’s agenda.

CONCLUSION

As has been discussed in this dissertation, the caste system has been a growing institution that emerged in the early phases of Indian civilisation, and continued with almost similar rhythm and patterns even after the establishment of democracy in India. Theories of economic, sociological, anthropological and cosmological nature have been advanced to explain its development, although none has succeeded in satisfying all scholars and critics in the field. While most trace it back to the *varna* system, others regard it as a legacy of the pre-Aryan society, or understand it as an ossification of primarily vocational groups. In any case, at various stages of social development, social institutions such as caste emerge as per the exigencies of the time, and eventually get fixed into the body of social structure in the form of customs and traditions.

The notion and practice of untouchability is the worst corollary of the caste system. It is the effect of a cultural-valuational differentiation rooted in a culture ordered in terms of purity versus impurity, and firmly grounded in economic and political inequality. It expresses itself in modes of treatment and the observance of certain practices imposed, from generation to generation, on a particular but sizeable section of the Indian population, the Dalits. These practices range from the denial of access to public places, temples or non-Dalit homes, to non-supply of goods and the prohibition of food and drink sharing, to the imposition of forced, unpaid or underpaid jobs, and confiscation of properties, all of which are exploitative forms, gestures of deference aimed at strengthening Dalits' humiliation and subordination.

This dissertation has aimed at mapping casteism through literature by bringing to light patterns of pre-ordained and degrading professions, generalised inaccessibility to resources and, most importantly, education, all secured by a systematic verbal and physical violence and overall legal vulnerability. Emancipation from the thraldom of the caste tyranny has proved to be a difficult task. Birth-based segregation has been reinforced by rigorous endogamy and strict control of women's sexuality, which means that one's birth determines the relative superiority or inferiority of a person. It also means the automatic indoctrination of every individual, who would thus learn and perpetuate the lesson of subjugation. The texts analysed demonstrate that

Dalits occupy the last rung in this graded inequality and, thus, bear the brunt of a cumulative domination by all the other castes.

The perpetuation of these patterns has set a particular bodily and moral identity for Dalits, as it has associated them with dirt, nakedness, reduced intellectual capacities and childish ignorance. Dalits have also been subjected to bodily branding and eroticisation and, in the case of Dalit males, a conditioned masculinity. This 'Otherising' of Dalits has led many critics to draw parallels between them and other disenfranchised communities, such as colonial subalterns and racial victims. The intermeshing of caste and class, the colour-coded prejudice, the master-slave framework, and the overall racial discourse are predicaments they all share, but only up to a point, because intra-caste division, an intrinsic characteristic of the caste system, together with the difficulty to find a theory that pinpoints its aetiology, clearly set Dalits apart.

Another substantial characteristic of the caste system is its gendered nature, which demonstrates that 'Dalit' is far from being a homogeneous category with fixed and universal layers of suffering. The caste system has constructed and shaped the image of the 'good Indian woman' and has distorted the image of the Dalit woman, as Anand and Bagul especially lay bare in their texts. Rendered as silent, submissive and passive, the Dalit woman suffers from accentuated discrimination as the patriarchy ruling Indian society adds to the patriarchy that holds sway over Dalit households. Patriarchy also coalesces with matriarchy, a fierce combination that leaves its mark especially on the figure of the daughter-in-law. This patriarchal —and matriarchal— codification of caste objectifies and denigrates the Dalit woman's body while converting it in the repository of male power and control, which ultimately establishes a dreadful and irrefutable link between female sexuality and the preservation of the caste order. Nevertheless, practices such as *Sati*, widow re-marriage or imposed widowhood, *Devadasi* and *tamasha*, as well as folklore, have in turn been claimed by women as clear evidence of their strength and resilience, as demonstrated by Bagul and Kamble in their writings.

Despite their characterisation as morally passive and submissive, Dalits have employed several strategies in their attempt to escape from the shackles of the caste system, although each one of them brought with it its own negative consequences. For instance, Dalits' access to education and their entry in schools accentuated their harassment and abuse. Similarly, in order to escape

physical segregation and retribution for transgressing limits in the rural space, Dalits migrated to urban areas. However, in their search for emancipation, anonymity and riddance of casteist stigma, they ran into 'urban untouchability', in which caste is often misplaced and misunderstood as class. Moreover, untouchability and casteism are perpetuated behind closed doors, thus adding new layers to their predicament and fostering the place-power relationship all along.

In the same vein, Dalits have also resorted to Sanskritisation; they have tried to shed their caste identity, to change their looks and modify their traditions and adopt upper-caste ones instead, all in an effort to blend in. This attempt at social mobility, closely related to the mimicry theory forwarded by Homi Bhabha (1984), has dovetailed into modern and upgraded casteist dominance that has evaluated Dalits according to mainstream Hindu values. More importantly, it has resulted in an imitation of the casteist enslavement of others, as Dalits began to enslave the weaker section among them: their women.

Intimacy and their bodies have also been part of their liberation plan. The highly constructed and marked Dalit bodies have been used as a site of resistance: they have questioned the cultural inscriptions on their 'disembodied' bodies, and aimed to transgress them through cross-caste love and marriage. However, private spheres of marriage, family and intimacy have remained heavily caste-marked, and inter-caste relationships have often ended up being unsuccessful, repressed, and often tragic forms of rebellion, as Roy poignantly illustrates in her text.

No doubt the most prominent strategy in their quest for social equality has been their conversion from Hinduism to other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, or the Ad Dharm religious philosophy. In most cases, the political dimension of their transition overstepped the spiritual motivation, since conversion was more feasible for individuals' emancipation than collective —and readily dismantled— upheavals. However, apostasy not always translated into better conditions, as Bama's narration points out. On the contrary, converts were often placed in a position analogous to that of their pre-conversion status and, in some cases, they even lost their only assets and legal safeguards, such as positive discrimination. In the case of Dalit women, conversion was often carried out by proxy, as they were forced into it by their husbands or fathers. All this created a feeling of in-betweenness in Dalits; they were no longer Hindus nor fully and equally accepted by the new faith.

Thus, despite multiple and multi-layered strategies, Dalits could not escape suffering, either physically or psychologically; if anything, they have been forced into assimilation, accommodation and internalisation of casteist precepts, which have converted them into both victims and perpetrators. The psychic alienation instilled in them created a generalised feeling of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), and many of them ended up resigning to eternal servitude, as is the case of Lakha in *Untouchable*.

This overall traumatic existence has had multiple psychosomatic effects on Dalits, such as emotional and physical blockage or numbing, temporal amnesia, vulnerability and apathy. Scholars on trauma studies have discussed the inadequacy of mainstream trauma theory to deal with traumatic experiences outside the western context, and have brought forth other paradigms, such as multidirectional suffering (Rothberg, 2009), complex PTSD (Herman, 1992a), insidious trauma (Root, 1989, 1992), DESNOS (Caruth, 1995a), or pre-traumatic stress (Pre-Tss) (Bond & Craps, 2017) in an attempt to comprehend the particularities of the suffering of victims of prolonged violence. As regards Dalits, they are not subject to an occasional or abrupt trauma, but are rather exposed to a trauma continuum (Nayar, 2018) and a transgenerational legacy of dispossession and discrimination that leaves an endless impact on their lives and psyche. Its cyclical and inextricable nature shapes a normalisation of trauma, in other words, it shapes the very experience of 'Dalitness'.

The fact that the oppression and violence meted out by the caste system was not aimed at a specific individual but at an entire community instead transforms Dalits' suffering into a collective type of trauma. The body of the individual Dalit is linked with the body of the community, from which identity and solidarity are built, as Kandasamy's text so brutally discloses. Thus, trauma paradoxically becomes the basis for both collective and personal identity and, by converting anguish into anger, Dalit victimhood becomes a vehicle for emancipation and a generator of active collective identity. The collective nature of individual Dalit pain is also in tune with the cultural and founding trauma theories proposed by Dominick LaCapra (2014).

In order to better understand trauma and its processes, critics underscore the importance of distinguishing between historical loss and structural absence —or between historical events and lack of foundations. Some scholars, such as LaCapra, argue that the very nature of a traumatic experience induces the collapse of distinctions; yet, the failure in this distinction or

the conversion of absence into loss may have severe consequences for the victims, such as endless melancholy, impossible mourning or interminable aporia. There is no specific loss in the case of Dalits, and there is no actual record of their original condition either; rather, they have lacked human rights, dignity, and equality of opportunities since time immemorial. There is thus a tension, on the one hand, between the idea that Dalits actually became Dalits through the experience of oppression, which implies that casteism and its oppression forged their identity and, on the other hand, the need to recover a sense of cultural selfhood that would somehow 'predate' this identity created around suffering. In other words, the conflict lies between the goal to form a common Dalit identity and the goal to lose that same identity.

The necessary distinction between loss and absence also reverberates in the ways available for victims to react to trauma. There is a plurality of alternatively proactive responses, such as resilience (Luckhurst, 2008), post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999), and negative sublimity (LaCapra, 2014) which have been accused of potentially promoting political 'quietism'. LaCapra (2014), for instance, proposes working-through and acting-out as interrelated modes of responding to trauma, and takes his cue from Freud's model of mourning and melancholia (1917). Yet, given that the origin of Dalits' trauma and oppression is problematic to trace and pigeonhole, and that the nature of their suffering is a historical and transhistorical 'in-between', Derrida's mid-mourning (1987) seems a more adequate and productive way to negotiate unsettled oppressive experiences like this, in which trauma may never be fully resolved or come to terms with.

Trauma is a thorny and haunting issue, and many victims and scholars have put forth the need to write and not remain silent. Literature's testimonial power has been extensively acknowledged (Pederson, 2014). But the representation of suffering in written form entails, without doubt, ethical dimensions, both in terms of subject matter and, most importantly, narrative style. The adequate way to respond to trauma and give an appropriate account of it has been first related to textual undecidability or unreadability, as a reflection of trauma's inaccessibility (Caruth, 1996). This meant going beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter, and internalise the rhythms, processes, structures and uncertainties of a traumatic experience (Vickroy, 2002). However, many scholars have pointed out the inadequacy of this narrative pattern for indigenous and subaltern writing, as their testimonies often depart from the 'unspeakability paradigm' (Kennedy & Wilson, 2003; Luckhurst, 2008). This rupture is clearly voiced in Dalit literature through the use of 'traumatic realism' (Rothberg, 2000), which

captures trauma in somatic terms. Dalit literature is marked by a generalised ‘corporealisation’ of social suffering and its blunt ‘representationality’ through the vivid literariness of memory. Apart from being dramatically and descriptively performed, Dalit testimonies function as speech acts wherein individual trauma is claimed on behalf of the entire Dalit community. Thus, rather than looking for gaps in the texts, Dalits emphasise the need to look at the text itself. Dalit writers also stress the fact that Dalit trauma exists beyond what is represented in these texts; that they are one voice among many silences (Nayar, 2012).

For most scholars, the adequate way of reading trauma testimonies is by means of posing oneself at the right distance between empathy and detachment, thus avoiding at all times converting oneself in a victim by proxy (Caruth, 1995a), partially experiencing trauma (Laub, 1992), or become a vicarious victim (LaCapra, 2014). The ‘critical empathy’ that most scholars advise combines affect with critical awareness of the difference between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Yet, Dalit writers highlight Dalit texts’ power to infiltrate through the act of reading, an ‘imaginative entry’ to which readers are expected to respond sympathetically, as witnesses and humans, to the narrative trauma, as is the case of both Kandasamy and Kamble, who attempted to involve the reader in a direct manner. This is what LaCapra (2014) termed ‘secondary witnessing’ and Hesford (2004) labelled as ‘rhetorical listening’.

In tune with the Indian social scene, the Indian literary domain reinforced the ‘outcaste’ status of Dalits through its politics of exclusion. Dalits were not only kept outside the village, but also outside of literature so as to avoid any kind of pollution. They were not only ‘untouchable’, but also ‘unrepresentable’. In the same vein, subject matter and authorship in mainstream literature were concentrated on the middle and upper castes, thus further obscuring the Indian ‘Other’. This created some standarisation and homogeneity of ideas, or ‘cultural hegemony’ (Saïd, 2003), which weakened the individual and strengthened certain cultural forms. In this case, the Indian nationalist agenda sought to confront British colonialism at every turn and, thus, any internal contradiction had to be silenced —among them, that of caste.

With the advent of the 20th century, Indian élite writers widened their scope and started to recognise the existence of the disenfranchised Other —a partial and conditioned recognition, nonetheless. Dalits were articulated by non-Dalit writers, but only when it appealed to the centre. The figure of Gandhi, who not only shaped India socially but also literarily, reinforced this upper-caste representation by instilling a sense of historical guilt and moral horror among

Indian writers. This literary commitment typified Dalits as figures who accepted the status quo and who, in addition, implemented it. This resulted in a new literary culture of spectatorial pity, sympathy and compassion, which epitomised Dalits as silent and submissive individuals in need of the upper castes' benevolent intervention.

This literature of pity has been characterised by the use of several 'well-intentioned' recourses, such as the colonial carnivalesque (Thiara, 2016), the martyrology of the abject (Fox, 2002), the figure of the noble savage (Anand, 2005), the fetishisation and aesthetisation of Dalits or the Hiranyagarbha syndrome (Khair, 2001). Yet, rather than representing Dalits, contemporary Indian mainstream literature has largely misrepresented them. It not only alienated Dalits from themselves, but it also created an alienated codification of them, which was ultimately internalised by its reading public. This also eased Dalits' control and their mapping, and excluded those who did not fit the casteist mould.

Undoubtedly, this sympathy literature raised issues of entitlement, voice appropriation and accuracy of representation. The authenticity of Dalits' portrayal in these texts was also called into question, as they neither attacked nor bluntly condemned Dalits' centuries-old discrimination. The Subaltern project —or the history from below— also offered alternative ways of (re)presenting the stories of the marginalised into the mainstream, but this agenda also proved to be deficient by telling some stories while forgetting others. The tendency towards essentialising the category of the 'subaltern' elides differences between different communities and contexts and, in the case of Dalits, it neglected the caste issue.

Writing from above not only affects content, but also aesthetics. In this case, most upper-caste writers relied on a condescending and patronising tone when depicting Dalits, and used techniques, such as the shrinkage of time or coalition of spaces, which constructed an eternal 'epic of the victim' and demonstrated the writers' unawareness of Dalit reality, changes or progress. Such is the case of both Mistry and Roy who, in their attempt to create a platform for Dalits, have failed to provide them with an authentic one both in terms of space and speech. Yet, despite their inadequacy, these representations created some resonance that shook the foundations of Indian mainstream literature, and paved the way for the emergence of Dalit writing.

The outsider's representation was necessary and important as long as there was no insider's perspective. Colonialism, the expansion of education and capitalism, and the formation of a working class in India contributed to a social shift in the 20th century that was also mirrored in literature. Dalits slowly re-appropriated and re-formulated their historical experience, and began to lay down a revised version of Indian history. The history of Dalit writers stretches back more than 500 years, with folk writers from the pre-independence period. Mystical devotionalism, for instance, also known as the *bhakti* movement, so prominent in the 15th and 16th centuries, was produced by sant poets, among whom there were Dalits such as Guru Ravidass or Kabir. However, although these writers were 'agents of change' (Zelliot, 1987), their agenda was not revolutionary enough; rather, they have been accused of fomenting social 'quietism'. Thus, the backbone of Dalit literature was constituted in the first half of the 20th century, with Ambedkar as their social leader and the Ambedkarite ideology as the main inspiration for this emerging literary corpus.

Given the politics of exclusion and history of cultural discrimination, the first generation of Dalit writers sought to imitate mainstream Indian writing, both in form and content. They worked within the boundaries framed for them and resorted to literary Sanskritisation. In the second half of the 20th century, along with the cultural relativism in vogue at the time, Dalits were convinced that their side of history had been systematically left out of mainstream discourse or else heavily distorted; this prompted Dalit writers to re-script historical and social discourse in literature using their own voices. They turned into writer-activists who regarded literature as part of the Dalit social and political movement, and helped to forge their agenda and contour their boundaries and scope. In the 1970s, the problem of Dalit selfhood was staged as a problem of literary self-representation and, after the consolidation of the Dalit Panthers, the diverse Dalit literary traditions across the country were unified as a corpus and category.

Modern Dalit literature is both the product and the vehicle of the Dalit movement, and is definitely a literature of action. In his definition of Dalit literature, Limbale explains that Dalit consciousness —or Dalit *chetna*— should inform the narrative process and serve as a gauge for authenticity (Limbale, 2004: 19). Dalit consciousness has slowly developed into a test whereby the 'Dalitness' of any text can be judged, an aspect on account of which Dalit literature has been accused of essentialism, as it decides what should be written, how, and by whom (Brueck, 2014). These second-generation writers sharpened their difference from the previous ones, a difference reflected, among other aspects, on their chosen aesthetics. They put such an

emphasis on aesthetics that some writers and critics have even requested a separate literary and aesthetic yardstick for Dalits. However, this was considered, not only problematic, but also detrimental to Dalit literature's agenda; it would not only set Dalit literature aside from the rest of Indian literature, but it would also over-delimit and reduce its politics (Jaaware, 2012).

Even if it abides by a mainstream yardstick, Dalit literature's deconstructivist approach has proven to be in tune with what Nancy Fraser (1990) has labelled as 'counterpublic'. Dalit literature is much more than a socio-political protest; it uses diverse narrative strategies and literary innovations, but it always remains as truthful as possible to Dalit reality and has a clear purpose and audience in mind. Disparate Dalit literary texts share location and landscape, select a similar reality which focuses on the village/city opposition, re-appropriate Dalit bodies and focus on the ordinary Dalit, use transgression as a political and aesthetic choice, adapt folk tales and myths so as to shape an active and transformative Dalit subjectivity, and build up the moral polarisation of the 'bad Brahmin versus the good Dalit' (Brueck, 2014: 84).

Dalit writers depict rage and agency and stress the need for change. Moreover, given the inadequacy of any existing language to represent Dalits' predicament, they aim at re-structuring language itself. They construct a heteroglossic Dalit register that imitates orality, uses intense and descriptive vocabulary, and offers vivid portrayals of marginality and suffering. The 'Dalitisation' of aesthetics entails a questioning of the tenets of classical aesthetics and an unromanticised and unpitying reflection of Dalit life, often through melodramatic realism and episodic plots jumping from memory to memory. It implies closeness to the authentic and 'raw' Dalit culture and using transgressive language, which some critics and writers have termed 'mud-house' writing (Guru, 2001a).

Many have accused Dalit literature of being propagandistic, univocal, biased and lacking artistic merit. Yet, Dalit literature has progressed in the last decades from a purely content-based perspective to a vibrant and constantly developing literary style, as the texts used for analysis in this dissertation have demonstrated. It has moved from documenting social, economic and political situations to a complementarity with literary aesthetics. Literature is used as a weapon, and disgrace and pity have been transformed into insurrectionary pride. The sharing of the same pain sprouting from similar casteist experiences has constructed common rage and resistance, transforming their 'narratives of pain' into 'narratives of resistance'. Thus, Dalit literature has undergone a drastic transformation in its response to the changing social

dynamics, shifting its tone from resignation and resilience to defiance, dissent and, finally, protest. The biggest challenge that contemporary Dalit writers face is, thus, the creation of a ‘fine balance’ between inclusion and the need to resist.

This literary dilemma is shared by other narratives of marginalised and oppressed communities. In fact, Dalit ‘difference’ has opened up to a form of universal difference, or ‘minor transnationalism’ (Lionnet & Shih, 2005), especially related to the African American context. However, while the parallel drawn has benefited Dalits in terms of illustration, support and even expansion, uncritical comparisons may also erase the specificities of each context, thus perpetuating in a way the very structural inequalities that produce the suffering.

As is the case of most marginalised literatures, Dalit writers have extensively used autobiographical writing as their most immediate way of writing. Yet, Dalit autobiography differs from the westernised ones in that it mixes testimony with politics, adds the element of performance (Nayar, 2012), and bases identity on narrative authority with a strong interconnection between the individual writer and the community while creating an individualised voice. This metonymic nature of Dalit writing has motivated many to consider them as ‘community manifestos’ (Kumar, 2010: 229) or ‘auto-ethnographies’ (Nayar, 2013) charged with a historical and spatial specificity which has undoubtedly shaped their consciousness. However, the normativisation of Dalit literature as autobiographical fails to capture the diversity of Dalit articulations. This is why many prefer to call them ‘life narratives’ in response to their genre heterogeneity.

The emphasis on authenticity has also risen questions of entitlement regarding the writing of Dalit literature. Many writers and critics argue that only a Dalit by birth has the appropriate and necessary sensitivity and experience to write Dalit literature, which circumscribes the form, content and authorship for Dalit writings. This birth-mark/speech-mark correlation has been considered by many as a mirror-like inversion of the exclusionary caste structure and an essentialist project of self-assertion from which non-Dalit writers are excluded. Moreover, the rejection of non-Dalit input on the matter may lead to isolation and radicalisation, as it might limit the access to Dalit literature and its transformative possibilities, and generate the aporia of perpetually legitimising the object of struggle. In fact, there has been a shift in the last decades towards underlining Dalit literature’s limits and pointing out the need to expand them so as to uncover new perspectives and supportive representations.

The essentialism of the Dalit project has also affected it internally. It has legitimised narrow and gendered representations and has depicted Dalit selfhood as a monolithic image with a largely male-centric orientation. However, Dalit identity is neither homogeneous nor unified and, therefore, the correlation of a part for the whole is problematic and oblivious. The systematic assumptions of gender neutrality in Dalit literature over the decades have rendered Dalit women invisible. They have only been 'guest appearances' in Dalit texts (Guru, 2008: 160), largely stereotyped as backward-thinking, sacrificing mothers and wives, and silent and submissive victims, as put forth by Anand, Bagul and Jadhav. The 'rape script' added to these stereotypes (Brueck, 2014) by building a discursive determinism and further oppressing the Dalit woman's body and self. It accentuated their social devaluation, vulnerability, and the spectatorial pity crafted around them. As both the Indian feminist movement and the Dalit movement itself failed to adequately engage with their predicament, Dalit women have resolved to take hold of the pen themselves, and reclaim the widening of the literary scope which could alone shed light on their own Dalit realities. Standing at the intersection of ethnicity, caste and gender, Bama, Kamble and Kandasamy not only present a different side of the story, but they also feel the need to tell it differently, steered by their differential experience (Rege, 1998). They attempt a Dalit feminist recuperation of the casteist and misogynistic narrative and a re-imagination of the representative norm, through both covert and overt agency and resistance. Most importantly, they testify to the mechanisms of power, both among the powerful and the powerless.

The identity and consciousness of the materially advantaged Dalits have also been disregarded since they do not meet the requirements of Dalit *chetna*. This creamy layer is testimonial to the social change in India through their economic, educational, cultural and spatial betterment. Yet, their advancement distances them from the 'authentic' Dalit experience and, consequently, their writings are considered inappropriate representations of it. Writers such as Navaria experience an ambivalence of belonging which many of them have tried to master by seeking a balance between proximity to and distance from Dalit *chetna*. Yet, besides the struggle to fit their narratives into the essentialist Dalit literary rubric —possibly contributing to reproducing and keeping alive the stereotyped image of Dalits— these advantaged writers ended up experiencing alienation and liminality, both from their community and the Indian society at large. In fact, the prevalence of this feeling is such that they have aimed to incorporate this crisis of identity and alienation as constituents of Dalit subjectivity. This lays bare not only the

heterogeneity of the Dalit identity, but also the rhetoric of modernity and secular foundations in India and their pseudo-equality.

As has been argued in this thesis, the fundamental goal of Dalit writers in establishing and carefully guarding the boundaries of their recent literary genre has been to exercise control over their own representation.[161] The aesthetic and thematic character of modern Dalit literature has evolved from the initial outcry of a silenced majority on the margins into a carefully mediated body of texts that are increasingly forcing their way into the mainstream Indian literary and social consciousness. Yet, increased interaction of different sub-agendas remains a terrain fraught with anxiety for many Dalit writers.

Currently, two big —and seemingly antagonistic— strands dominate Dalit thinking and identity formation: on the one hand, the annihilation of caste and, on the other, the affirmation of one's caste identity. While the argument in favour of the annihilation of caste proposes a politics of emancipation and calls for the immediate removal of the conditions that preserve and reproduce caste —in other words, a process of dis-identification from pre-established identities— the proponents of caste-identity affirmation locate Dalit literature firmly within recent and ongoing conditions. In tune with the first postulation, S. Anand contends that the term 'Dalit' does not refer to an identity or a cluster of castes, but to a particular standpoint and perspective of the absolute rejection of caste (Anand, 2006). Conversely, Dalit intellectual Ravikumar advocates for identity building arguing that "Dalit is not identity, it is subjectivity. If we believe in annihilation of caste, we cannot build Dalit identity" (Ravikumar qtd. in Hons, 2018: 4).

There are, however, critical voices that claim that Dalit writing has run out of fuel and is repeating itself; that in asserting Dalit social reality, their narratives have become stereotypical and predictable. Against this, a new trend has emerged among Dalit writers that seeks to assert its distinct social and literary identity, but claiming to operate as an integrated, enriching

[161] The Dalit Lekhak Sangh, founded in Delhi in the late 1990s, is a network of writers and critics that work to carve out a space for the Dalit voice in Indian and international literary contexts. Actively involved in defining contemporary Dalit literature, from analysing its origins to conceiving its modern innovations, a new generation of writers is transforming Dalit literature from a broadly communal narrative of suffering to include such issues as feminism, literary self-consciousness and individual introspection, while increasingly wrestling with the question of how mainstream this literature may become without losing its authentic Dalit identity. However, it is debatable whether the current activities of the DLS are helping to bring some awareness of Dalit literature to the masses, or whether the group is more aptly described as creating an élite forum for Dalit intellectuals to debate issues of representation, identity and aesthetics (Brueck, 2009).

addition to the rhetorical space of the dominant social and literary public rather than as a discordant entity opposed to its norms. In other words, they simultaneously attempt to assert and insert a new recognition and respect for alternative Dalit discourse into this established sphere. In order to achieve this, young Dalit writers question the stress on autobiography, engage in new and different aesthetic techniques, examine the implications of the impact of globalisation on Dalit literature and the consequences of the formation of a 'cosmopolitan Dalit identity', assess the possible diversification of Dalit voices and, most significantly, explore the possibility of Dalits being a part of Indian literature, thus demonstrating a more mature approach altogether. In pondering about the future of Dalit literature, Limbale writes:

> We want to keep it alive as long as this caste system is alive. That is why it is said that we are posturing as writers, that we are not neutral. But whenever Dalit writers write, they have a role in mind, a clear intention —opposing the caste system. (Limbale, 2004: 157)

This implies that Dalit literature, truthful to its original commitment, will cease to exist when the socio-economic conditions of Dalits finally undergo substantial change. However, the modernist view of caste identities diverges from the anthropological definition of caste as a system of hierarchy based on pollution. As current data prove, caste has resurfaced and metamorphosed in 21st-century India, which leads one to venture that Dalits' suffering and oppression will not easily fade away and, therefore, their voices will feel the compulsion to continue articulating their predicament, adjusting their protest to each situation.

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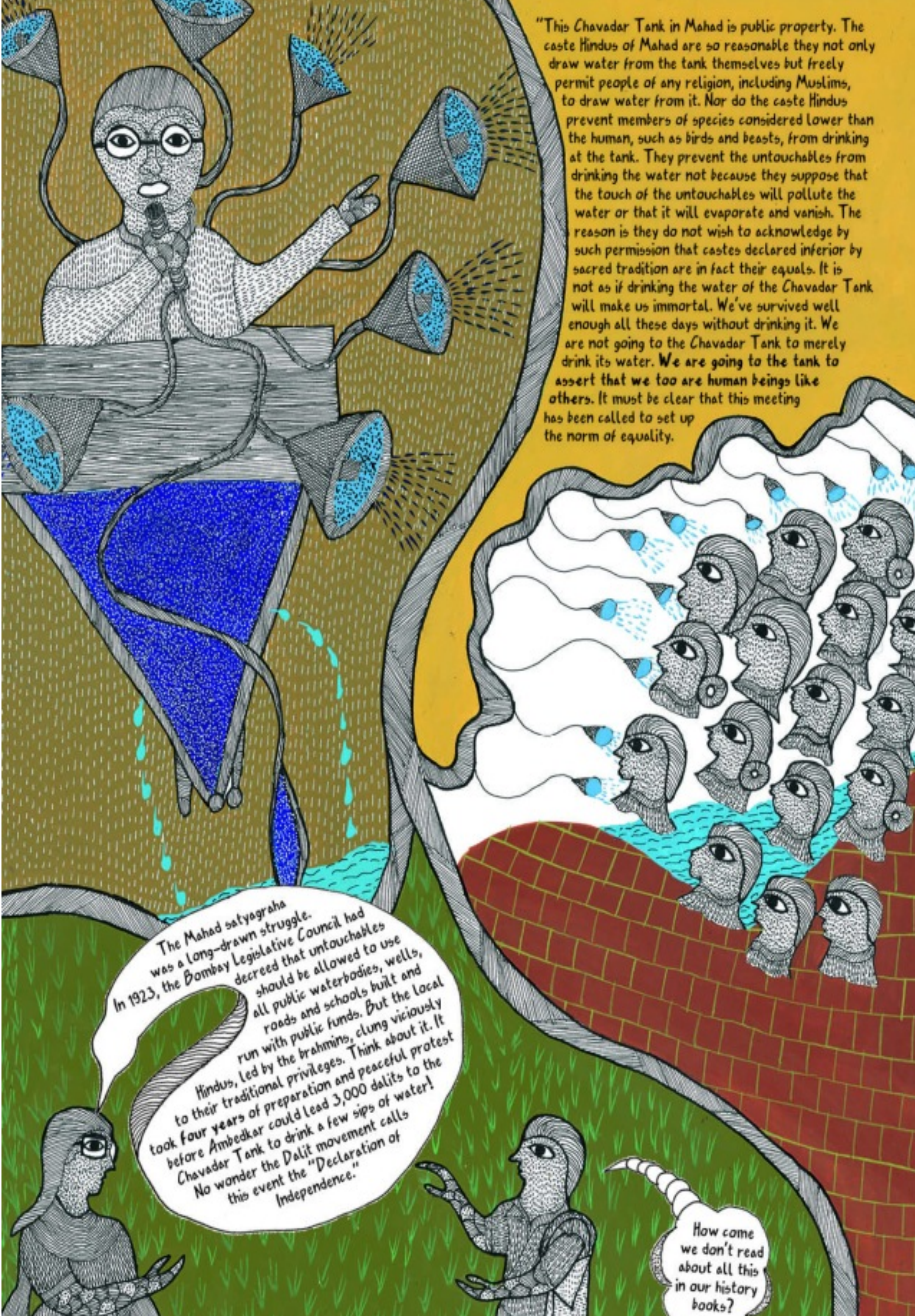
"This Chavadar Tank in Mahad is public property. The caste Hindus of Mahad are so reasonable they not only draw water from the tank themselves but freely permit people of any religion, including Muslims, to draw water from it. Nor do the caste Hindus prevent members of species considered lower than the human, such as birds and beasts, from drinking at the tank. They prevent the untouchables from drinking the water not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. The reason is they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals. It is not as if drinking the water of the Chavadar Tank will make us immortal. We've survived well enough all these days without drinking it. We are not going to the Chavadar Tank to merely drink its water. **We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others.** It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality.
The Mahad satyagraha was a long-drawn struggle. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council had decreed that untouchables should be allowed to use all public waterbodies, wells, roads and schools built and run with public funds. But the local Hindus, led by the brahmins, clung viciously to their traditional privileges. Think about it. It took **four years** of preparation and peaceful protest before Ambedkar could lead 3,000 dalits to the Chavadar Tank to drink a few sips of water! No wonder the Dalit movement calls this event the "Declaration of Independence."
How come we don't read about all this in our history books?