

Rewriting Resistance

Caste and Gender in Indian Literature

Edited by

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Foreword

by *Nazia Hasan*

I wish something laudatory could be written about caste and gender. There are massive changes but sometimes many turn out to be deceptive. It may be denying a seat to a female state representative in an international meeting to the everyday humiliation that a substantial number of persons go through across our glorified nation for they lost in the gender or caste lottery.

Casteism and gender bias have been issues too ancient and too contemporary, too obvious, too ignored or too unknown, too apologized, too shielded, too resisted. Both issues are at times declared as residue of our revered and repressed past; but the ongoing stories are outrageous and capable of gripping one with fear or pity! The contemporary situation has seen new lows. They are simply glaring, staggering and hit hard upon the peace of mind.

Casteism is no longer only in the traditional sense of the *nimno varga*, or the lowest caste, it is anybody who is out of the mainstream populace. Gender bias appears as another kind of casteism. The tyranny of the majority comes back to reinforce the malaise in different colours and garbs every now and then. The mythology of the 'Other' keeps going strong and traumatising all who fall below the fabricated line.

Only an Edenesque society may be pure and purged of casteism and gender bias. Yet let's always remember that the persistence does not justify it to be natural. It is a cultivated and harvested practice.

How did we reach this state where we trample upon or let others crush civil rights and humanitarian solutions to secure the comfort and glory of some persons? Our constitutional and human rights are going through another phase of impoverished and undignified compromise. If this soul-destroying belligerence and malice are not addressed urgently, we will annihilate ourselves to a society where everybody becomes irrelevant in some way. The mistakes of the so-called scared past need to be addressed by rising against hidden and revealed lies, cultivated ignorance, manufactured starvation and diseases (did I mean pandemics?), ignited chaos. The enforced silence has been reigning for too long.

Recent analysis of Indian textbooks and other media proves that for 16 pages of writing about the majority or upper castes, only one page gives space to the Dalits and less than half to women, not even a paragraph to other genders! Mass graves are filled out even today, for if someone is dropped out of a text- it is

more than not recognising the very presence or existence. It gets a replica in all those denied or denigrated rights, opportunities and benefits! For this kind of a situation with a history, 're-memory' is the act prescribed by the wise and the astute; in order to get out of the abridged or fabricated, or submerged histories. It involves recollecting and reassembling of facts and details to get strength at a time when 'the battle between remembering and forgetting is more than a device of the narrative' (Morrison, T). The collective amnesia has already caused such massive losses and victims. It's time the marginalised caste people, women and other genders become the subject of our discussions and writings.

The silences, the submerged experiences, the distorted or evasive parts of our social life and history have a tremendous potential for not only better narratives but also contain opportunity for critical thinking and problem-solving. It has already given voice to new art forms like Dalit genre, women's literature, queer literature and the genre of the marginalised. They are shedding light on the human capacity to wreak and bear inhuman treatment; etching new paths of going through life, but the categories still carry the flag of difference and othering. Our general, every day thinking and writings need to embrace these areas.

We need to ascertain for our times that humanity as equality is the supreme thing to do; not only exploring the space, going for vanity projects or building up empires of industries to manufacture more products and more consumers. We need to pay heed to the chaos around us, the breaking up and pushing downs going within.

I hope this book is not only informative or instructive but also uplifting and encouraging towards dialogues, by inviting compassion and ethical, humane thinking. I wish the editors and the contributors the strength to make a bright change!

Nazia Hasan
Professor
Aligarh Muslim University

Preface

Some recent phenomena that shook the very chord of our consciousness primarily help us developing the volume *Rewriting Resistance: Caste and Gender in Indian Literature*. An incident in the United States where a black man named George Floyd was brutally tortured to death by a white policeman in custody on 25 May 2020 shocked the world. It led to demonstrations and protests from millions spreading across the country and abroad. In India, a Facebook post of a Professor of History at Jadavpur University over holding an examination during the pandemic (Covid-19) created a great uproar as she was being trolled with nasty comments for her tribal status. This same incident points to how the notion of caste is still deeply ingrained in our society. In a more recent case, four upper-caste men allegedly gang-raped a 19-year-old Dalit woman in the Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh on 14 September 2020, and she finally died that quivered the entire nation. Many such cases are occurring daily all over India, and we hardly bother to pay attention or raise our voices against such issues. It is born out of the hegemonic oppression of a particular section of our society operating at a level where other things fail to show the result.

Resistance through writing is one such tool that can bring a lot of change for the people of the deprived section if used effectively. Like any other art form, literature engages in a pivotal role divulging an individual's resistance against the hegemony through their writing. So, there has been a conscious effort on the part of the writers from different sections of our society as they bring forth issues to the world through their pen. Literary scholars, over the years, have keenly paid attention to the subject of caste, class, and gender; it witnessed a massive surge through the publication and translation of regional literature in India and Indian literature in English. As it functions in society as a continuing symbolic criticism of values, literature exposes and transforms experiences through various genres. It consists of all the aspects of life. It helps us to bring out the problems of class division and caste discrimination existing in our society from the very past, but that has always remained in the state of constant flux or fluidity. Writers like M. R. Anand, Raja Rao, U. R. Ananthamurthy, Urmila Pawar, Subramanian Shankar, Rohinton Mistry, Arvind Adiga, Meena Kandasamy, and Manu Joseph express their deep concern on the issues through various genres and try to create a world which would be free from any discrimination. The other writers such as Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Shobha De, Manju Kapur, Amrita Pritam, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mahesh Dattani, Nayantara Saghla, Anita Desai, as the list goes

long, come forward to fight against any institutionalized gender prejudice and speak up in a constructive way exposing gender inequality in society, government and non-governmental offices, educational institutions, and in the political sphere, etc. They draw accurate pictures of our society portraying the subjugation and objectification of the female body.

The primary aim of this volume is to re-visit literary texts in terms of what it reveals about the resistance registered through the sufferings of human beings in the hand of fellow human beings in the Indian scholarly writings, which will surely be an impetus effort to write about the issues.

Editors

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Editing a collection of research articles on 'caste' and 'gender' would have been an excruciating process as it had not have been possible without the contributors' help, sincerity, and commitment. The chapters have been collected from different contributors belonging to different parts of India. Despite the ongoing crisis due to the COVID-19, almost all the contributors have kept their promises and submitted their manuscripts within the given time. So, we are immensely grateful to all the contributors and express our sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful inputs and valuable comments, which have helped us to revise the given chapters and bring the volume together.

We have given a proper shape and an acceptable form to our edited volume with the help of our mentor Professor Nazia Hasan (at Women's College, Aligarh Muslim University, UP, India). We are also very thankful to all our colleagues for their constant encouragement and supports. We further thank our friends (too many to list here, but you know who you are!) for providing support during the preparation of the book. We must end by thanking the *Vernon Press*, America, for the constant support, cooperation, and agreement to publish this work.

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Caste and Gender: An Introduction

I

The word caste, which is etymologically derived from the Portuguese word *casta*, standing for “race, lineage, tribe or breed” (qtd. in Kumar 2020: n. p.), is a widely used term both in the English and Indian languages. In essence, we don’t find an exact translated word for the caste, but we have the word ‘jati’ as its most appropriate form. Moreover, casteism - a “prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of caste” (“Casteism” *Lexico Dictionaries*: web) – is primarily drawn on social, political, and religious factors which may engender a social prejudice where one community/group exclusively segregates or excludes another community/group, thus producing a social hierarchy of upper and lower castes. The upper-caste people impose their hegemonic ideologies on the minds of the lower-caste people as they make them believe that they are inferior and unsocial and are born only to serve them. Such a particular community or group creates social stratification for social, political, economic, and religious gains. So, the hierarchy and divisions are not inborn; instead, they are artificial predispositions that rank people on a scale of ritual purity where “each caste [enjoys] differential access to religious privilege and civil rights” (Hardgrave, Jr. 1968: 1065). The caste system still prevails primarily in India and some other parts of South Asia.

The scholars and philosophers from the West widely define and vividly explore the term ‘caste’ and its socio-political dimension in their writings. G. D. Berreman delineated the caste system as a “system of birth-ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction” (Berreman 1960: 70). In his book *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (1966), L. Dumont (a French anthropologist) depicted religious ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ as the essential basis of caste and casteism, which is being actively practised in some parts of India as the upper-caste would not allow the lower-caste people to collect water from the same well or ponds. M. Weber, a German sociologist, defined caste as a “status community having a specific style of life” (qtd. in Gandhi, 1980: 1). The view postulated by Weber was later supported and followed by A. Beteille, a professor at the University of Delhi. Beteille lengthened its definition further as “a status community characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, occupation, ritual status and a specific style of life” (Beteille 1965: 46). After Weber and Beteille, G. S. Ghurye from the University of Bombay postulated how men created such social

hierarchy for men as a “segmental division of society” (qtd. in Gandhi, 1980: 1). The philosopher J. Fowler, the head of Religious Studies at the University of Wales-Newport, held a similar view like Beteille and Weber; he considered caste as an occupational instead of geographical segregation, and also believed that it is impossible to draw the timeline of its existence in her book *Hinduism: Beliefs and Practices* (2014). Broadly, “the caste unit [is] regarded as a normally endogamous, commensally exclusive, and characterized by a hereditary craft or occupation” (Hardgrave, Jr. 1968: 1065).

R. Inden, a famous Indologist, defined caste as a fluid entity referring to endogamous varna (colour), which signifies endogamous ‘jatis’ in his book *Imagined India* (1990). ‘Caste,’ for Andre Beteille, is not an appropriate illustration of the word ‘jati’ in English. Instead, he chose the phrase ‘ethnic group’ for ‘jatis’ (not caste) in his essay “Varna and Jati” (1996). From the field of comparative religion, Professor A. Sharma saw ‘jatis’ and ‘caste’ as synonymous entities and elaborated this in his book *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction* (2000). The word varna “seems to have been employed in contrasting the Arya and the *dasa*, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively” (qtd. in Roy 1979: 297). In India, varna is mainly categorised into four main classes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—found in the ancient Indian texts. Other categories of people, such as the ‘tribals’ and the untouchables/Dalits, known as jatis, do not come under these four orbits. So, varna is something static and very limited in the number that has persistently prevailed in Indian society, while we find thousands of jatis/caste in India. Therefore, caste/jati appears to be the more complex and diverse terms as compared to varna, but it is impossible to separate one from the other as both are closely connected: “It was seen as a closed stratification system in which the various castes (jatis), each symbolically related to the other within the framework of varna, formed an organic whole” (Hardgrave, Jr. 1968: 1065). So,

Our understanding about caste in Indian society is that changes within the caste hierarchy cannot be properly appreciated without situating all castes and sub-castes in the overall ideological umbrella of Hindu religion. Every caste and sub-caste and Hindu religion of every variety are integrally interlinked and interrelated. (Bhambhri 1999: 2619)

While class stratification based on the varnas is less implemented, the divisions based on caste are numerous. “In a class system it is the family or person who is the bearer of status; in the caste system it is the caste. The caste system emphasizes group status and morality; the individual without a caste is a meaningless social entity” (Cox 1944: 141–142). Unlike class, “...a man’s caste, however, does tend to decide his rank. In other words, his class is his rank, while

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