

Caste and the Present: Modernism, Modernity and Dalit Writing in India

Udaya Kumar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Dalit – Sanskrit *Dalita* – burst, split, broken, torn, rent; torn asunder, cut to pieces, wounded; opened, unfolded, expanded, blown, full blown; divided in two, bisected, halved; divided into degrees, distributed; driven asunder, scattered; trodden down; crushed; destroyed; manifested. (Monier Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1872)

Some dates:

Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890)

Foundation of Satyashodhak Samaj – 1873

Publication of *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) – 1873

Dr B R Ambedkar (1891-1956)

Publication of “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” – 1917

Mahad Satyagraha - 1927

Publication of *The Annihilation of Caste* – 1936

Public conversion to Buddhism – 1956

Dalit Literature

1958	The first conference of the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha.
1963	Baburao Bagul's first collection of stories
1972	Formation of Dalit Panther
1973	Namdev Dhasal's <i>Golpitha</i> (Marathi)
1982	Daya Pawar's <i>Baluta</i> (Marathi)
1984	Sharan Kumar Limbale's <i>Akkarmashi</i> (Marathi)
1992	Bama's <i>Karukku</i> (Tamil)
1997	Om Prakash Valmiki's <i>Jhootan</i> (Hindi)
2006	P. Sivakami's <i>The Grip of Change</i> (Tamil)

Further Reading:

Dangle, Arjun, ed. 1991. *The Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Limbale, Sharankumar. 2003. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Tr. Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Tharu, Susie. 1996. “The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 1 June. 1311-15.

Jaaware, Aniket. 2012. *Destitute Literature*. First Mahatma Jyotirao Phule Oration. Mumbai: University of Mumbai.

Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu, eds. 2011. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam. New Delhi: Penguin.

_____, eds. 2013. *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India*. Dossier 2: Kannada and Telugu. New Delhi: Harper Collins.

Levinas, Emmanuel. 2003. *On Escape, De l'evasion*, tr. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Guru, Gopal, ed. 2009. *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, Anupama. 2009. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- _____. 2017. "The Word and the World: Dalit Aesthetics as a Critique of Everyday Life." *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. 53:1-2. 147-61.

One:

IDENTITY CARD

S Joseph

In my student days
 a girl came laughing.
 Our hands met kneading
 her rice and fish curry.
 On a bench we became
 a Hindu-Christian family.
 I whiled away my time
 reading Neruda's poetry;
 and meanwhile I misplaced
 my identity card.
 I noticed, she said
 returning my card:
 the account of your stipend
 is entered there in red.
 These days I never look at
 a boy and a girl lost in themselves.
 They will depart after a while.
 I won't be surprised even if they unite.
 Their identity cards
 won't have scribblings in red.

Two:

Extract from **Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Outcaste***

When the teacher noticed me, apparently doing nothing, he grew annoyed and shouted, 'You, son of a bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don't you?' I picked up my slate and pencil, spat on the slate, smeared it and wiped the slate with my shirt which was already dirty having been used like this so many times before. I didn't know how and what to write. I kept thinking of how we had squatted in a circle under a tree in the forest, eating. I remembered the hands of high-caste boys and girls offering us their leftovers, the withered tree in whose shade we sat, the bundle of leftovers, the question my mother had asked, and the teacher calling me a son of a bitch and a beef-eater. How should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for? (2-3)

Three:

From Baburao Bagul, "Mother"

A:

The children looked up – backward children with their peaked, ragged faces – at the teacher. The poem was about a mother, and they remembered the warmth of the mother's lap, the only place where they ever felt secure. The teacher's voice went on, smoothing, melodious, and they were transported to a new joy of being. The children, usually quite indifferent to school, smiled happily through their unkempt hair; their muddy faces shone with a strange wonder. The teacher's song-like voice rose higher and higher, and then it was all over. The sound of the bell broke in harshly and the children were pulled back from their brief moments of joy, and this strange new wonder was lost. Very soon, the children went back to their usual antics – the pummelling and the shouting, the scuffing of feet, the fights and the swearing.

The poem continued to haunt Pandu, however. He started thinking of his own mother as 'Vatsalya Sindhu' – a river of motherly love and benediction – just as the poet had done. He was finally convinced of her greatness. The heavy burden he always carried on his shoulders lifted somewhat and he was a child once again, wanting to shout, to run and wave his arms about in joy. The hostility that he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play, and a benign smile slowly came to his face.

B:

The door opened and the overseer stood in the doorway. His massive frame seemed to dwarf everything else in the room.

'What's happened? Why do you look so scared? You're sweating.' He hugged her, pretended to wipe the sweat off her face, and started caressing her arms and breasts. She slowly responded, and out of the hunger of the past ten years of widowhood, flared an uncontrollable desire. And that was why she failed to hear the timid knock at the door, the faint, hesitant cry, 'Mother!' He saw them, his mother and the towering figure of the overseer in a tight embrace. His last hopes seemed to crash about his head; broken-hearted, he wildly rushed towards the door. She saw him then, ran after him calling his name but the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms.

Pandu was running away at great speed; his fast falling tears had almost blinded him, the stray dogs ran at his heels, snapped at him and now he was screaming, shouting with terror, afraid of the dogs...

She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in a quagmire, she found release impossible...

Four:

From Sanjay Palshikar, "Understanding Humiliation," in Guru, ed. *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*.

The full and exact meaning of humiliation, whether taken as an episode or a form of life, derives from what its opposite is presumed to be. The force or the point of the complaint depends on whether the purported humiliation is understood to be a negation of say, one's manhood, or, one's majesty, or, simply, one's worth as a person. If, what we choose to describe as "humiliation" is an affront to our manhood, our description of the event would be different from, say, an account of violation of human dignity. More specifically the subject-agent's response to the perceived humiliation is conceptually tied to the perception of what is it that has been violated. "Affront to manliness" is obviously different from "inhuman treatment". It is in this sense that every complaint of humiliation implicitly operates with a pair of opposites. The opposite of whatever one is forcibly made out to be is either already present in the institutions and practices of the society, or, it is posited as a goal to be realised. For example, either there is a pre-existing practice of, say, honour, or self-respect, and its loss is construed as humiliation; or, alternatively, a project to win respect, honour, or glory enables one to characterise the situation that has prevailed so far as humiliating. In this, "humiliation" is like "alienation", which can either be used to tell a story of lost unity – a simple past to present movement – or to bring a historically possible future into an evaluative relationship with the present. As a result of this theoretical manoeuvre, the present begins to look morally wrong or deficient. Thus "humiliation", like "alienation", can work as a normative fulcrum of the critique of the present order.

Five:

From Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape / De l'évasion*

On first analysis, shame appears to be reserved for phenomena of a moral order: one feels ashamed for having acted badly, for having deviated from the norm. It is the representation we form of ourselves as diminished beings with which we are pained to identify. Yet shame's whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend. ...

This first description, albeit superficial, reveals to us that shame is more attached to the being of our I than it is to its finitude... Nevertheless, this analysis of shame is insufficient, for it presents shame as a function of a determinate act, a morally bad act. It is important that free shame from this condition.

Shame arises each time we are unable to make others forget (*faire oublier*) our basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot bury or cover up. The timid man who is all arms and legs is ultimately incapable of covering the nakedness of his physical presence with his moral person. Poverty is not a vice, but it is shameful because, like the beggar's rags, it shows up the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself.

In shameful nakedness, what is thus in question is not only the body's nakedness. ... For what is the meaning of shameful nakedness? It is this that one seeks to hide from others but also from oneself. ... If shame is present, it means that we cannot hide what we should like to hide. The necessity of fleeing, in order to hide oneself, is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself. What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself. Nakedness is shameful when it is the sheer visibility (*patence*) of our being, of its ultimate intimacy.