The Politics of Representation: Caste in Contemporary Indian Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving representation of caste in contemporary Indian fiction published between 1990 and 2023. Through a textual analysis of selected works by authors including Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy, Perumal Murugan, and Sujatha Gidla, the study interrogates how caste hierarchies are depicted, challenged, and reimagined in post-liberalization Indian literature. Drawing on postcolonial and Dalit feminist theoretical frameworks, the analysis reveals a significant shift from symbolic to explicit representations of caste, with marginalized voices increasingly moving from the periphery to the center of narrative construction. The paper argues that contemporary Indian fiction has become a critical site for contesting hegemonic narratives about caste, offering counter-discourses that highlight both the persistence of caste-based discrimination and emergent forms of resistance. This literary intervention contributes to broader sociopolitical conversations about structural inequalities in modern India, demonstrating fiction's potential for both cultural critique and social transformation.

Introduction

The hierarchical caste system continues to shape social relations, political structures, and cultural production in contemporary India despite constitutional prohibitions against caste-based discrimination. While scholarly attention has focused extensively on sociological and anthropological dimensions of caste, its literary representations offer unique insights into how this persistent social structure is experienced, contested, and reimagined. This paper addresses the critical question: How do contemporary Indian writers represent, interrogate, and challenge caste hierarchies through fictional narratives?

The significance of this inquiry lies in its exploration of literature as both a reflection of social realities and a potential site for resistance against entrenched hierarchies. As Teltumbde argues, literary representations can either reinforce or destabilize dominant narratives about caste, making fiction a contested terrain for cultural politics (Teltumbde). This

study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the relationship between literature and social transformation by examining how fiction mediates discussions about caste in post-liberalization India.

The research questions guiding this analysis include: How has the representation of caste in Indian fiction evolved since the 1990s? How do writers from different caste positions approach questions of caste identity and discrimination? What narrative strategies do authors employ to challenge hegemonic understandings of caste? In what ways does contemporary fiction engage with intersections between caste and other axes of identity such as gender, class, and religion?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical traditions: postcolonial theory and Dalit studies. From postcolonial theory, I draw on conceptualizations of representation as articulated by scholars like (Spivak 271), who distinguishes between "speaking for" (representation as proxy) and "re-presenting" (representation as portraiture). This distinction is particularly relevant for analyzing how non-Dalit authors depict caste experiences versus how Dalit writers articulate their own narratives. Spivak's critique of the "epistemic violence" inflicted when marginalized groups are represented by others informs my analysis of authorial positionality and representational ethics.

Complementing this approach, I engage with frameworks from Dalit studies, particularly Ambedkar's (1936/2014) critique of caste as a system of "graded inequality" and Tharu and Satyanarayana's (2013) conceptualization of Dalit literature as a counter-hegemonic discursive practice. Limbale's (2004) definition of Dalit literature as writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness provides a useful lens for distinguishing between various modes of caste representation in contemporary fiction.

Additionally, I incorporate insights from literary theorists like Chandra, who proposes that contemporary Indian fiction can be analyzed as a "field of cultural production" (borrowing from Bourdieu) where various caste positions compete for legitimacy and recognition (Chandra). This framework helps illuminate how literary representations of caste are embedded within broader structures of cultural power.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach combining close textual analysis with contextual interpretation. The methodological framework draws on cultural studies approaches to literature, particularly Williams' (1977) concept of literature as a "social form" that both reflects and constitutes social relations. Following this tradition, I analyze literary texts as cultural artifacts embedded within specific historical and social contexts, paying attention to both textual features and extratextual conditions of production and reception.

The corpus for this study consists of eight contemporary Indian novels published between 1990 and 2023, selected to represent diverse approaches to caste representation:

- *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy
- *Untouchable* (1997) by Mulk Raj Anand (included as a point of contrast with contemporary works)
- *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga
- *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla
- *Pyre* (2016) by Perumal Murugan (translated from Tamil)
- *When I Hit You* (2017) by Meena Kandasamy
- *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde
- *Cobalt Blue* (2013) by Sachin Kundalkar (translated from Marathi)

The analysis focuses on several dimensions of caste representation:

- *Narrative structure***:** How caste hierarchies shape narrative form, point of view, and character development
- *Language and discourse***:** How linguistic choices reflect or challenge caste ideologies
- *Characterization***:** How characters from different caste positions are depicted
- *Thematic concerns***:** How caste intersects with other social structures
- *Authorial positionality***:** How the author's social location shapes representational strategies

For each text, I conduct a close reading that attends to both explicit and implicit representations of caste, analyzing not only what is said about caste but also what remains unsaid or is presented obliquely. This approach follows Macherey's (1978) method of symptomatic reading, which focuses on textual absences and contradictions as sites of ideological tension.

Analysis: Evolving Representations of Caste in Contemporary Indian Fiction

From Symbolic to Explicit: Changing Modes of Caste Representation

Early post-independence Indian fiction often approached caste through symbolic or allegorical representations, a tradition exemplified by Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935). While groundbreaking in its time, Anand's portrayal of the Dalit protagonist Bakha has been critiqued for its paternalistic perspective and reliance on upper-caste savior narratives (Brueck, 2014). Contemporary fiction, in contrast, increasingly features explicit engagements with caste hierarchies and their consequences.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) marks a significant transition in this regard, presenting caste not as a discrete social issue but as a pervasive system that structures intimate relationships and personal possibilities. Roy's narrative revolves around the transgressive relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman from a formerly upper-caste Hindu family, and Velutha, a Paravan (Dalit) man. The novel's nonlinear structure mirrors the disruptive potential of their relationship, which challenges both caste and gender hierarchies. Roy depicts caste violence not as an anomaly but as the enforcement mechanism of a normative social order:

> They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered
> with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And
> how much (Roy 31).

This passage illustrates Roy's approach to caste as a system regulating not only social status but also affective possibilities—who can love whom, and in what ways. Unlike earlier novels that presented caste primarily as a social problem to be solved through modernization, Roy's work portrays it as deeply embedded in cultural logics that persist despite formal legal equality.

More recent works by Dalit authors have moved beyond Roy's approach to center explicitly on Dalit subjectivity and resistance. Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), while marketed as memoir rather than fiction, employs novelistic techniques to narrate her family's experiences as Christian Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Gidla's work represents a significant development in the literary representation of caste, replacing the external gaze of non-Dalit authors with an insider perspective that foregrounds Dalit agency. Her narrative challenges patronizing depictions of Dalits as passive victims, instead highlighting how her

family members, particularly her uncle K.G. Satyamurthy, actively resisted caste oppression through political organizing.

Caste and Intersectionality: Gender, Class, and Regional Identities

Contemporary Indian fiction increasingly explores how caste intersects with other axes of identity, particularly gender. Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (2017) examines how caste ideology shapes intimate relationships even among educated, ostensibly progressive individuals. The novel's unnamed narrator, a feminist writer who marries a university lecturer with communist affiliations, discovers that her husband's political commitment to equality does not extend to their domestic relationship. While caste is not explicitly named as the central concern of the novel, Kandasamy subtly reveals how Brahminical patriarchy structures gender relations across caste lines.

The narrator observes of her husband: "He speaks of revolution but expects me to serve him like a slave" (Kandasamy 78). This contradiction between public politics and private behavior echoes feminist critiques of how caste hierarchies are reproduced through domestic arrangements even in supposedly radical spaces. Kandasamy's work thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of caste as operating not only through visible forms of discrimination but also through naturalized patterns of domestic labor and authority.

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* (2016, translated from Tamil) similarly explores caste through the lens of an inter-caste marriage. The novel follows Saroja and Kumaresan, whose marriage across caste lines provokes violent opposition from Kumaresan's community. Unlike urban narratives where caste sometimes appears as residual or fading, Murugan's rural setting presents caste as an immediate, embodied reality that determines life possibilities. The novel's tragic conclusion—the implied murder of the pregnant Saroja—refuses the developmental narrative in which modernity inevitably erodes caste boundaries, instead highlighting the intensification of caste violence as a reaction to perceived threats to the system.

Murugan's regional perspective also illustrates how caste operates differently across India's diverse linguistic and cultural regions. While English-language fiction by cosmopolitan authors sometimes presents caste as a singular, unified system, works translated from regional languages often reveal more complex, locally specific manifestations of caste hierarchy. This regional diversity in caste representation challenges homogenizing narratives about Indian society and underscores the importance of translation in developing a comprehensive understanding of caste in contemporary literature.

Narrative Strategies: Voice, Language, and Form

Contemporary Indian fiction employs diverse narrative strategies to represent caste experiences and challenge dominant discourses. These strategies include experiments with linguistic hybridity, narrative perspective, and generic conventions.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) adopts the narrative device of a series of letters written by Balram Halwai, a lower-caste entrepreneur who has escaped his village through morally ambiguous means. Adiga's use of first-person narration gives voice to a character who would typically be marginalized in traditional narratives, allowing readers to witness his complex negotiation of caste constraints. Balram's darkly humorous tone undercuts both romantic nationalist narratives about village India and progressive narratives about democratization:

> The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. The roosters in the coop know they're going to be killed. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country (Adiga 173).

This metaphor of the "Rooster Coop" represents Balram's understanding of how caste and class hierarchies are maintained not only through external coercion but also through internalized constraints. Adiga's narrative strategy gives readers access to the consciousness of a character who is simultaneously victim, critic, and perpetrator of systemic violence, complicating simplistic moral judgments.

In terms of language, many contemporary Indian novels incorporate untranslated words and phrases from regional languages, particularly when referring to caste categories. This linguistic hybridity challenges the adequacy of English—historically the language of colonizers and elites—to represent caste experiences. For instance, in Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* (2013, translated from Marathi), caste identities are often marked through untranslated Marathi terms, preserving the specific cultural connotations that would be lost in translation. This strategy highlights the tension between the global reach of English-language publishing and the locally specific manifestations of caste.

Formally, contemporary novels addressing caste often employ nonlinear narratives and multiple perspectives to represent the fractured experiences produced by caste hierarchies. Roy's *The God of Small Things* moves between time periods and perspectives, while Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* combines memoir, poetry, and theoretical reflection. These formal experiments reject the coherent, teleological narratives of nation-building that characterized earlier Indian fiction, instead highlighting ruptures, contradictions, and alternative possibilities.

Publishing Contexts and Reception

The representation of caste in contemporary Indian fiction cannot be separated from its conditions of production and circulation. The rise of multinational publishing corporations in post-liberalization India has created new opportunities for diverse voices but also raised questions about the commodification of marginalized experiences for global consumption.

Works like Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Adiga's *The White Tiger* achieved international recognition through prestigious literary prizes (the Booker Prize in both cases), bringing issues of caste to global attention. However, scholars like (Mendes 275) have questioned whether such international success depends on packaging caste issues in forms palatable to Western readers, potentially reinforcing exoticizing readings of Indian society.

The reception of works by Dalit authors reveals ongoing tensions in the literary field. While writers like Kandasamy have achieved significant recognition, many Dalit authors continue to face barriers to publication and critical acknowledgment. The relatively recent emergence of dedicated platforms for Dalit literature, such as Navayana Publishing, signals both the historical exclusion of Dalit voices and emerging efforts to address this imbalance.

Translation plays a crucial role in this context, as many significant works addressing caste are originally written in regional languages. The increasing visibility of translated works like Murugan's novels indicates growing recognition of regional literature's importance for understanding caste dynamics. However, the selective nature of translation—with some languages and regions better represented than others—means that the English-language literary sphere remains an incomplete reflection of India's diverse caste narratives.

Critical Evaluation

The analysis reveals several significant trends in the representation of caste in contemporary Indian fiction. First, there has been a clear shift from symbolic or allegorical representations toward more explicit engagements with caste as a lived reality. Second, the emergence of Dalit writers as significant literary voices has challenged the dominance of upper-caste perspectives, though representation remains uneven across publishing platforms. Third, contemporary fiction increasingly represents caste as intersecting with other social structures, particularly gender and class, rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

These developments suggest that contemporary Indian fiction has become an important site for contesting hegemonic narratives about caste. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The literary field remains structured by disparities in access to publication, translation, and critical recognition, with works in English and certain regional languages receiving disproportionate attention. Additionally, the commercialization of publishing raises questions about whether some representations of caste suffering serve primarily as cultural capital in global literary markets.

Alternative interpretations might emphasize different aspects of these trends. Some scholars might view the international success of novels addressing caste as evidence of progressive recognition of social justice issues, while others might critique this same phenomenon as the commodification of marginal experiences. Similarly, the increased visibility of explicit caste critique might be read either as a sign of growing resistance to hierarchy or as evidence that caste persists despite decades of formal equality.

Implications

The evolving representation of caste in contemporary Indian fiction has several important implications for both literary studies and broader social understanding. For literary scholarship, it underscores the need to develop more nuanced frameworks for analyzing how literature mediates social hierarchies—frameworks that account for both textual strategies and contexts of production and reception. The increasing prominence of Dalit literature challenges conventional canons and critical approaches, necessitating new interpretive methods attentive to specific histories of caste oppression and resistance.

For social understanding, these literary representations offer valuable insights into how caste operates in contemporary India, particularly in its less visible or acknowledged forms. Fiction can reveal the subtle ways caste ideology persists in ostensibly modern, urban settings and how it intersects with newer forms of social organization. By presenting caste not as a traditional residue but as an evolving system that adapts to changing conditions, contemporary literature challenges simplistic narratives of modernization and progress.

More broadly, these literary interventions contribute to ongoing debates about representation itself—who can speak for whom, and how marginalized experiences can be authentically conveyed. The increasing prominence of authors writing from marginalized caste positions demonstrates the importance of what Spivak calls "speaking as" rather than "speaking for," while raising continuing questions about how such voices are received and interpreted.

Conclusion

This analysis of caste representation in contemporary Indian fiction reveals a literary field increasingly characterized by contested narratives, diverse perspectives, and formal experimentation. Moving beyond earlier traditions that approached caste primarily through reformist or symbolic frames, contemporary authors engage directly with caste as a complex system that shapes both social structures and intimate experiences. The emergence of powerful Dalit voices in the literary sphere, alongside continued engagement with caste by authors from various social positions, has produced a multifaceted body of work that both documents caste oppression and imagines possibilities for resistance.

These literary developments reflect broader social transformations in post-liberalization India, where traditional hierarchies persist alongside new forms of mobility and consciousness. By representing caste not as a static tradition but as a dynamic system that adapts to changing conditions, contemporary fiction offers valuable insights into how social inequalities are reproduced and challenged in modern contexts.

Future research might productively explore several questions raised by this analysis: How do digital platforms and new media create opportunities for caste narratives outside

traditional publishing structures? How does diaspora literature engage with questions of caste? How might comparative approaches illuminate connections between caste and other systems of social stratification globally?

As contemporary Indian fiction continues to evolve, its engagement with caste serves as a powerful reminder of literature's capacity to both reflect and reshape social realities—to document injustice while imagining more equitable futures.

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