

Interrogating Alternative Constructions of Caste Paradigms through Art

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The recognition of caste as social capital and its ultimate translation into financial capital with tremendous economic benefits does not eliminate the caste hierarchies that continue to manoeuvre structures of violence against the supposedly inferior castes, particularly Dalits. It is the multiplicity of caste hierarchies that has enabled the prevention of socio-cultural attempts to unify the oppressed castes into a single movement. The inauguration of formal discourse on the physical and psychological impacts of caste hierarchies by Bhimrao Ambedkar in the twentieth century has managed to formulate a union that refuses to accept its social status as a reason for its degradation. The navigation of the Ambedkarite movement by Ambedkar and his followers has led to the emergence of a distinct Dalit consciousness in the 1960s, which has been effective in increasing emphasis on caste realities throughout history. Contemporary socio-political discourse has recurred the resurgence of the centrality of caste in the Indian milieu. The Hathras gang-rape in September 2020 has, for instance, necessitated the evaluation of caste dynamics in the late-capitalist society of India, particularly the re-reading of Ambedkar's critical essays and the examination of the development of the Ambedkarite movement.

Literature, art and social media, in the same vein, contribute to the constant re-examining of the caste problem since they are powerful tools in contemporary society for initiating discourse on caste-related discrimination in both academic and popular fora. The works of Ajay Navaria and Meena Kandasamy have concretised the advent of Dalit subjectivities in the realm of literature. The emergence of postmodernist art forms has, however, been equally instrumental in inviting global dialogue on the brutalities of caste. For example, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* is a critically acclaimed graphic novel that features tribal art form by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam. The artists are

practitioners of the global art form of Pardhan-Gond for a global mercantilist culture that allows tribal art a gateway to an international audience so that the capitalist culture can fulfil the contemporary demand for cultural inclusivity. Although commodification of literature has somewhat subsumed the socio-historical narratives of protest in *Bhimayana* to place more emphasis on the stylistic felicity of the art form, the novel remains a remarkable achievement in producing postmodernist Dalit art.¹ The protagonist's discomfiture of being a Dalit effectively dismantles the myth of social harmony in Hinduism. It reveals the prejudices that create cultural binaries for the assertion of Brahmanical supremacy. This facilitates the process of exposure of moral corruption caused by orthodox policies of Hinduism. That the protagonist faces discrimination from people belonging to other religious communities further de-iconises the meta-narrative of religion and challenges the hierarchal conceptions of supposedly sanctimonious theological beliefs.

The emergence of social media as a consequence of advancements in technology has modified conventional models of the conceptualisation of art. Digital modes of artistic creation also enable individuals to access online resources for the production of art. Such modes have gained popularity by social activists who aim to deliberate on pertinent issues like caste and gender by the usage of digital technology. Priyanka Paul is, for instance, a famous artist whose works have received widespread acclaim. Paul's creation of digital artwork is a testimony to the democratisation of technology and its contribution in giving the dispossessed an agency. While Internet access is still contingent on one's economic position, the integrality of technology in contemporary political and economic systems has indeed led to widespread digitalisation. The digital movement has especially become the primary mode of communication since the imposition of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibition of the ethos of avant-garde artistry in Paul's works situates her postmodernist art within the broader nexus of Dalit art. Like tribal artists, she articulates her artistic expression by using an organic style that blurs the boundary between the real, the

¹ This paper does not suggest that the entirety of Dalit art has a postmodern ethic. Rather, it engages with postmodern articulations of Dalit subjectivities in an attempt to comprehend the shift in the production and consumption of art in contemporary popular spaces. Furthermore, this paper equates Dalit art with art forms produced by Dalits, which can be consumed by both Dalit and non-Dalit audiences.

unreal and the surreal. But, she also fuses her admixture of creative compositions with aesthetically appealing patterns to make her work both impactful and commercial.

The similarities between *Bhimayana's* art and Paul's illustrations are not limited to cursory examinations. They exemplify the spirit of postmodernism and dismantle traditional conceptions to inaugurate novel forms of expression. Shweta Basu argues that the drawing in *Bhimayana* engages with dots, speckles and intermeshed lines that add a multi-layered pattern of performance for the readers' participation with the text (Basu 2017). That the graphic novel transgresses literary expectations by deviating from the established canon of the graphic idiom marks its effectiveness in infusing rigour in Dalit art. Its dignified output remains relevant for both the intelligentsia and the popular culture. While it performs the edifying function of prompting new ideas in academic discourse, it also manages to emerge as an artefact for public consumption. Similarly, Paul's digital illustrations do not adhere to a symmetrical or formal structure. Instead, they become a collage of loose frames, which creates a distinct visual image that serves to inform and educate. While her chief concern lies with the exposure of Dalit social issues, she also integrates intersectional thematic constructs pertaining to her identity as a queer Dalit women of South Asian descent. In one of her illustrations, she reverses the power structure that the Hindu caste hierarchy mandates: she portrays an interesting encounter between an Ambedkarite and a typical upper caste Brahmin. The cultural insignias within the postmodernist context of authorial depersonalisation are suggestive of numerous interpretative potentialities, thereby expanding the scope of her work. Her occasional incorporation of anthropomorphised images is another factor that makes her illustrations crucial for critical analysis of the modifications in Dalit art with the advancement of technology.

The usage of landscape imagery in *Bhimayana* and Paul's illustrations also reveals a pattern of undeniable similitude. Supriya Banerjee points out that the aesthetics of the graphic novel poses a challenge to the historical narratives in Indian educational institutions (Banerjee 2017). This is made particularly effective by evoking elements from the nature in loosely structure *digna* patterns to critique institutionally sanctioned versions of history. Furthermore, the addition of plant and animal imagery humanises the Dalit persona, presents a realistic account, and establishes the novel's concomitance with narratives of

resistance that deliberately defy the custom for the assertion of autonomy. For instance, *Bhimayana* features a train as snakes, a river as fish, fortresses as beasts, and a water pump as an elephant's trunk. Paul utilises a largely surrealist approach in personifying houses, mirror-reflections, human eyes and fish. She constructs contorted images without adhering to the norms of sequentiality to produce intersectional art that aims to be representational in its limited capacity. Technical devices like phones and laptops sometimes recur in illustrations for adding an element of contemporaneity. One illustration features smudges of a boiled egg on the elitist and canonical Mona Lisa painting while another features a car that gets integrated with other images that cause widespread caste-based violence in totality.

Another important commonality is the reflection of postmodernist elements. Since postmodernism does not espouse a rigid manifesto of rules, the primary factor that determines its constitution is the range of themes that it allegedly covers. Postmodern art is typically intertextual, self-reflexive, pluralist, discontinuous and sceptical. It differs from modernist art in its tendency to celebrate the fragmentation and incoherence, and rejects signifieds to challenge the perception of a permanent reality. According to Baudrillard's definition of postmodernism as a cultural formation, the postmodern subjectivities in the contemporary world order are accompanied by multinational or consumer capitalism (Baudrillard 1994). Although *Bhimayana* and Paul's illustrations do not aim to follow the thematic or structural regulations of any literary or aesthetic movement, including postmodernism, they can be labelled as postmodernist in their defiant tendencies. Their ultimate objective is, after all, the revision of historical narratives of caste to prevent the occlusion or appropriation of Dalit voices. *Bhimayana*, for instance, uses its art form to demonstrate that though it focusses on presenting the life history of the Dalit community, the Dalit identity itself is not monolithic. It decentralises the mainstream narrative to project the realities for Dalits. Therefore, the scorpion in-signed speech bubbles install the casteist speech of the society precisely to subvert it. Paul similarly adds the depiction of the male gaze and male glance to her illustrations to destabilise these signifiers.

Lyotard's incredulity toward universal truths or meta-narratives also gets reflected in both *Bhimayana* and Paul's art (Lyotard 1988). There is an explicit portrayal of mini-narratives that do not make grand promises of liberation. The loose and fluid patterns

utilised in Dalit art discard the pretensions of totalising tendencies that subsume minor narratives by homogenising or ignoring them. This enables the distinctive practices utilised by Dalit artists to be positioned in a unique vocabulary of visual art that explicitly attacks the social construction of caste. The manifestation of the ethos of the subaltern identity in both *Bhimayana* and Paul's illustrations alters the process of analysis of visual art. The recurrence of organic imagery in Dalit art also strengthens the narrative of resistance by reinforcing the discourse on caste and its associated subjectivities. Since the objective of art remains intact, its impact as a tool of resistance increases as it becomes the mouthpiece of the subaltern agency and experience. This produces alternate constructions of art by the initiation of new caste paradigms.

By interrogating the mode of legitimisation of Brahmanical supremacy, contemporary models of Dalit art, therefore, uniquely establish their self-conscious scepticism to the ideas of power, privilege and position. The cultural ethos produced as a consequence of this active engagement in resistance against Brahmanical supremacy use a prism of conventionality to subvert the traditional and undermine its production of socially sanctioned meanings.

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