

Vulnerable Manhood and Subordinate Dalit Masculinity: A Critical Study of Select Dalit Autobiographical Narratives

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ABSTRACT

*Masculinity and femininity exist in binary opposition. Connell categorizes four types of masculinities such as hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized. Dalit masculinities are largely subordinate and marginal. This paper deals with images of subordinate masculinity which are depicted by male Dalit writers. Literary representations of Dalit Masculinities are relational to gender identification, social legitimacy of caste, economic value of labour, manifestations of maleness within family and community. The paper aims to critically examine notions of “caste body” and “outcaste body”; and how masculinities of ‘outcaste’ male bodies are represented in the writings of Dalit male writers. It also explores the relations of caste-based production of Dalit bodies. The primary sources of this study are two Dalit autobiographical narratives Manoranjan Byapari’s *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* and Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*.*

KEYWORDS: *Dalit, outcaste, subordinate, manhood, masculinity, representation*

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Introduction

R. W. Connell states “gender is a way of structuring social practice in general” and it “intersects—better, interacts—with race and class” (75). In South Asian perspectives, gender intersects and interacts with not only “race” and “class” but also with caste and ethnicity. Femininity and masculinity are the gendered appropriate behaviours and expressions that a society expects from its people. Masculinity is a type of gender identification which is not femininity or associated with it, in other words, masculinity and femininity exist in binary opposition. Connell categorizes four types of masculinities such as hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized. This paper deals with images of subordinated masculinity which are depicted by male Dalit writers.

Literary representations of Dalit Masculinities are relational to gender identification, social legitimacy of caste, economic value of labour, and manifestations of maleness within family and community. Most of the Dalit autobiographies by male writers depict the formation of their gender identities since their childhood. Dalit writers in different parts of India depict their socio-economic conditions, exploitations, and resistances in local cultural contexts but their representation of marginal position in social hierarchies is a universal phenomenon. The paper critically examines notions of “caste body” and “outcaste body”; and how masculinities of ‘outcaste’ male bodies are represented in the writings of male Dalit writers. It also explores the relation of caste-based production of Dalit bodies. The primary sources of this study are two Dalit autobiographical narratives, Manoranjan Byapari’s *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* and Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*.

Caste Body and “Outcaste” Body

Charu Gupta examines that untouchable bodies or Dalit bodies are socially, politically and culturally manipulated, dismantled, constructed, interpreted and reinterpreted by colonial authorities, the upper castes and Dalits themselves (112). The constructions of Dalit bodies are largely interlinked with caste question and power structure. The caste structure generates, validates, and asserts broadly two types of bodies, caste body and “outcaste” body. The caste according to Samuel, formulates and legitimises “the subject” and “the object”; and within this framework, “the caste subject is valid subject, the

subject whose body along matters” (57). In the words of Judith Butler, the caste discourse can be seen as an “exclusory matrix by which subjects are formed” and it “requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings” (xiii). To put it simply, the whole systematic caste discourse needs “the outsider,” or perhaps more rightly an object (or an “abject” according to Butler) to sustain its hierarchical power structure. To examine “outcaste body,” Butler’s concept of “the abject” might appropriately help this section:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (xiii)

Formations of “the subject” and “the abject” have been theorized. For Butler, the concept of the abject indicates those who occupy in “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life who do not get the status of the subject. The abject is formed through “the force of exclusion” and rejection, therefore, it is an “outside” and it constructs “inside” the subject. Likewise, the untouchable bodies or the Dalit bodies are constructed through a sense of repulsion, rejection, and physical as well as cultural separation. Untouchable bodies are considered as disgusting and dirty and their physical movements are recognised as “mobile dirt” or “walking dirt.” Gopal Guru examines the experience of the caste boundaries of Dalits during the colonial period in different cities like Kanpur, Bombay and Malabar Hill:

The untouchable’s image as “walking dirt” was chained to his or her physical association, and the experience of being “a walking dirt,” which of course was given to him or her, was sustained through the static nature

of the space. Ambedkar, along with other untouchables, also the depository of this experience of space. It was static in the sense that the urban space like the village, was equally hostile to the dignity of untouchables as the latter could not appear in public without a sense of shame. (Guru and Sarukkai 91)

The caste minds construct and interpret Dalit bodies through a series of process and socializations. The conception of dirt is not a unique and isolated phenomenon, rather it is a mechanism of a system. For Mary Douglas, “dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (36). This is a social mechanism of exclusion and rejection of non-normalized elements and is placed against a cultural mechanism of purification. Anupama Rao rightly points out “the Dalit body continues to be the site of recurrent stigmatization, making it a historical and contemporary object of suffering” (xiii).

In another sense, the untouchable bodies or “the outcaste bodies” formulate and validate the upper caste bodies or the caste bodies which makes a body touchable. For Joshua Samuel, “caste subjects and outcaste subjects create and sustain each other, all the while maintaining the hierarchy between them” (58). The constructions of caste body and “outcaste” body are not quite simple, rather a deep complex power structure is related to it. Michel Foucault theorizes how body (subject) is formed by the exercise of power:

The power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. In short, this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. (26-27)

The “exercise” of power on/in bodies can be interpreted as “a strategy” and “the overall effect of its strategic positions” manifest the position of both the dominant class and the dominated class. In other words, the “strategic positions” of power-politics of caste ideology generate the caste body and the “outcaste” body.

Byapari experiences that a refugee is always “an outsider” in the eyes of the Ghoti of West Bengal. In his early age, he is employed as a servant only for ‘rice to eat’ in the house of a Brahmin doctor where he first encounters untouchability which makes him feel his ‘outcaste,’ dirt and untouchable body.

I was a Namashudra, that caste group which had earlier been called Chandal. These people knew this and treated me as a dirty detestable animal. The plate from which I ate was an old and twisted one which the lady of the house would let fall the rice and vegetables from a considerable height so as to evade my polluting touch. I would take that food and sit in a corner of the courtyard like a beggar. This plate could not enter the house henceforth and so, after washing it, I would keep it in the cowshed. That was also the place where I slept, on a few sacks of ghute, the fuel made out of dried cowdung. The stench of the cows’ urine and the bites of the mosquitoes would not let me sleep much during the night. It was during day when I took cows out to graze that I would get my sleep, under a tree. (Byapari 42-43)

Byapari depicts the lower caste individual ‘could be denied the respect of a human being from upper caste Hindus’ (44) but at the same time when it becomes a matter of both Dalit and Muslim, they (upper castes) grant Dalits “a position more acceptable than that of the Muslims” (44). Here, Muslim bodies along with Dalit bodies are manufactured as “outcaste body” or unacceptable or less acceptable bodies. In this context, Byapari comments, “for centuries, this ill-fated land had humiliated and tormented one community of people in the name of caste and another community of people in the name of religion” (44).

Valmiki narrates one incident when he gives company to Bhikhuram, the younger brother of Balakram who is a sweeper in the Inter College to go “to the village of Master Brajpal” to bring “a sack of wheat from his home” (49). They traveled a long way and reached the house of Master Brajpal that is a Taga’s home (upper caste

landlord). Members of Brajpal's house affectionately treat them and serve a meal. After finishing their meal, they encounter 'someone else' who asks their caste identity. When they reveal their caste i.e. the chuhra caste, the situation changes in a moment, the previous affectionate treatment turns into disgust, verbal abuse and violence. Valmiki narrates the incident after revealing their caste identity:

Lifting a heavy stick from underneath the charpai, the elder hit Bhikhuram on his back. He had a lot of strength and Bhikhuram crumbled. Obscenities began to rain from the elder's mouth. His eyes were fierce and his skinny body was harboring the devil. We had dared to eat in their dishes and sit on their charpai, a crime in his eyes. I was standing below the porch, frightened. The elder was screaming, and his voice had drawn a crowd. Many people suggested that we should be tied to a rope and hung from the tree. (51)

This incident is different from Byapari's incident but the issues and the pattern are same. The transgressions of "outcaste" bodies are not permissible from their prescribed places in the society, rather they are maintained, manipulated, and separated by a series of mechanism where violence and verbal abuse are used as tools of cultural mechanism of caste. This culture of control and repulsion produces certain kinds of masculinity of the "outcaste" male bodies which needs further interpretation.

Caste Based Production and Dalit Bodies

Indian economic structure is caste-based structure and in caste mode of production, bonded labour, free labour, less paid labour, and exploitation of Dalit bodies are visible characteristics. In rural areas, dalit labour is mostly associated with agricultural production where caste plays major role for production mechanism. The brahmanical hegemony like bourgeois hegemony controls the body of Dalits or other service castes or the proletariats. In *Political Economy of Caste in India*, K. S. Chalam describes "the economic value of labour power is determined in relation to the social and ritual status of caste and the supply of labour is regulated by the system of caste rule" (18). Dalit people are working class people, and Mike Donaldson states that the body capacity of working men is their economic asset, what they put it on the labour market (Connell 55). Dalit people's body, labour and bodily performance are their economic assets that

are often altered, regulated and negotiated. The economic value of an/the untouchable's labour starts with zero and goes in ascending order and/while Brahmans get a higher premium value.

Byapari provides an elaborate description of the zero worth of Dalit body and labour in his *Interrogating My Chandal Life*. Jeeban, a character, was stuck in the quarter of Havildar at Lucknow's Char Bagh Station and felt that he could not free himself from "an invisible spider's web" of Havildar. He must remain here, and must do "all the household work there—the massage, the fetching water, the washing, the cleaning" but he would not get his month's salary (101). Like Jeeban, the son of Narsiah in *My Father Baliah*, a Dalit autobiography, has to work as an unpaid labour for the Dora (the landlord):

His son [Narsiah], about fifteen years old, worked as a jeetagadu—a labourer who worked for the landlord day and night without being paid any wage- and often slept in the cattle shed in order to be accessible to the landlord and his family at all times. (Satyanarayana 6)

Though Narsiah's father got fifty acres of land as a gift from the Nizam for his excellent craftsmanship, the Dora snatched all lands and made his family mere agricultural labours in his field. Yet Narsiah became happy because "the Dora had not had him beaten up" for the lands.

Manoranjan Byapari depicts ambivalently the perpetual binary of "chotolok" and "bhadralok" in urban space of West Bengal. He examines that three words are inextricably linked with each other in the Indian social system, and in the minds of the Bengalis, particularly the urban-resident Bengalis: lowly folk, lowly caste, and physical labour.

Historically those who are from the low castes have been made to engage in all kinds of physical labour, such as pulling the carts, carrying the heavy loads, washing the utensils, and doing all the other forms of physical labour to fill their stomachs. The ones who are gentlemen, live in nice houses, eat nice food, and work in such a manner that no sweat dirties their clothes (Byapari 120). Gupta examines the idea of Dalit manhood in colonial discourse and in upper-castes narratives and shows how Dalit manhood is constructed:

Since Dalit men did hard manual labour, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as resilient and dim-witted, thus reinforcing their status within domestic subservience. The Chamar male, for example, was often seen as docile, both in colonial and upper-caste literature, ready to do hard work. The Dalit male body was infantilized, tamed, and trained for practical use. Dalits were considered a form of agricultural machinery, valued primarily for their hard work, endurance, and productive capability. (114)

In *Joothan*, Valmiki gives a vivid description of caste mode production and exploitation of dalits in rural agricultural sector. Chuhras are the proletariats and the Tagas play the role of bourgeois. Caste system creates a state apparatus and thereby, it sustains capitalist tyranny of Brahmanism. The author provides an authentic picture of exploitation of Dalits in rural agricultural production:

We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning, agricultural work and general labour. We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. (Valmiki 2)

The capitalist brahmanical patriarchy always finds a way for maximum profit and seeks “a way to maintain their domination without changing anything” (Valmiki 37). K. S. Chalam (21) mentioning caste rule, has enlisted six ways of deprivation and subordination of Dalits and those manoeuvring are:

1. Discrimination and denial of right to own property
2. Untouchability and physical alienation
3. Offences and atrocities to create terror not to cross social borders
4. Economic deprivation by denying access to public and common property
5. Using judiciary as a source of deprivation of rights
6. Promoting division and fragmentation within to suppress protest.

The chuhras possess no agricultural land, they work in the field of Tagas as less paid and unpaid labour. When a group of young men in Chuhra basti had refused “to work without wages” and demanded proper wages, the Tagas had taken “the help of the chief constable of Pukazi police station” to suppress this protest. Ten people have been

caught from the basti by two constables and they are being made to stand like a rooster.

The narrator showed how the protest was silenced violently:

Eight or ten policemen were standing around, batons in the hand, guns on their shoulders. Those who had been captured from the basti were being made to stand like a rooster, very painful crouched up position. Moreover they were being beaten with batons. The policeman who was beating them was getting tired. The one being beaten would scream after every blow. This festival of valour was being celebrated openly. People watched quietly without a word. There was no protest from any side.
(Valmiki 38)

This is systematic organizational suppression, oppression, exploitation, and humiliation of Dalits. The manifestation of violence is the strategy by which brahmanical hegemony collectively inserts terror among the people. In broad daylight, the barbaric atrocity is used as a tool to erase the spirit of dissent even for minimum wages. Being an agent of brahmanical patriarchy, the police shatters potential zeal of Dalits. The author questions accountability of democracy in independent India:

Why is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. As though we are not citizens of this country. The weak and helpless have been suppressed for thousands of years, just in this manner. There is no accounting of how many talents have been wiped out by deception and treachery. (Valmiki 39)

The rights of higher castes to control Dalits and inherit property rights are sanctioned by religious principles (Limbale 38). Narsiah in *My Father Baliah* possesses fifty acres land from the Nizam but as an untouchable has no property rights, as the Dora, the landlord snatches the land away. Satyanarayana depicts atrocity of caste system and how the untouchables are deprived from property rights:

The hapless untouchables never dared question the caste Hindus, and suffered every brutality silently. Their condition was such that they were not allowed to walk facing people from the higher castes since even that was considered a means of pollution. Possessing even a small piece of land

was distant dream for these deprived, dispossessed outcastes.

(Satyanarayana 5)

'The culture' of making 'silence' (Mani 35) of Dalit is the predominant culture of upper castes. In this context, Bama (28), a renowned woman Dalit writer, in *Karukku* recounts that generation after generation Dalits have been enslaved, and constantly told of their humiliation, and they have come to believe that they are degraded, without dignity and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves keep themselves apart voluntarily. Kancha Ilaiah (37) theorizes caste performance where the lower the person's caste, the higher the obedience standard, the higher the person's caste the greater the incentive for speech and control.

The most vulnerable groups in India are Dalit people who are victims of Brahminical tyranny. On 21 December 2020, The Madras High Court registered a *Suo moto* Public Interest Litigation where The Bench of Justice N. Kirubakaran and Justice B. Pugalendhi remarked, "We have to hang our head in shame for having ill-treated and discriminated the Scheduled Caste people for centuries together" (Upadhyay). "The history of India", As Mani states "can be seen as a story of struggle for hegemony between the Brahmanic and anti-brahmanic traditions" (Mani 34). Historically, Dalit people have anti-brahminic practices through their religions, customs and way of life. The caste phenomenon, aggression and atrocity of Brahminic hegemonic masculinity and gender relations within Dalit communities should be studied to understand the patterns of Dalit Masculinities. In analysing South African black men's gender identity in "Subordinate Black South African Men without Fear," Kopano Ratele argues that some men appear to be simultaneously positioned as hegemonic and subordinate in the context of historically powerless race groups or subordinate classes (248). Likewise, images of Dalit masculinity are visible in Dalit literary texts as both hegemonic and subordinated.

Dalit hegemonic masculinity, nevertheless, is evident within their own societies, but subordinated masculine images are visible within the sphere of masculinities when Dalit people encounter upper castes people. Upper castes occupy power, wealth, predominate hierarchal social position and thereby, reproduce and legitimize an unequal social relation and perpetuate it. In the words of Raj Kumar, Dalit writers question the prevailing assumption of a society founded on caste, class, ethnicity, and

other forms of oppression through their autobiographies and aim to create a new model of social order based on equality and social justice (151).

The male characters are collectively weak and victimized because of their caste and class identities in the writings of Dalit writers. Valmiki narrates those men who were protesting for minimum wage received severe subjugation and brutality. Their bodies were wounded and their minds were crushed:

Those people returned home after a severe beating, bereft of all hope.
Silence was glued to their faces. There was deep anguish in their eyes.
Their bodies were wounded. That day no one lighted a stove in the basti.
Everyone was apprehensive. (Valmiki 39)

The mechanism of subjugation for demand of minimum wage is directly relational to subjugation of Dalit manhood. Valmiki narrates another incident of subjugation that he had suffered. It was day before mathematics exam for class ten board examination when he was taking preparation for mathematics paper, Fauz Singh Tyagi came and dragged him to his field. Fauz forced him to work that the author narrates: "I spend the whole morning sowing cane. Like me there were about eight or ten others who had been brought there under duress to work for free" (Valmiki 57). This incident indicates how dalit men's bodies are controlled, their free wills are restrained and their minds are made obedient. Dalit men are forced to sacrifice both their time and their health for the sake of not being beaten. They need to be obedient to brahmanical authority. In this context, Ilaiah states that Hinduism has a socioeconomic and cultural design that manipulates the consciousness of the Dalit bahujans systematically (96). It has created several institutions to sustain the hegemony of the brahmanical forces. Brahmanism has created the value system based along lines of touchability and untouchability; and as Patil, a friend of Valmiki, says, "the entire value system of the Brahmins is based on lies and deception" (96). However, in the broader gender orientation and socio-political context, the expressions of ostracized and subjugated manhood constitute Dalit subordinated masculinities.

Conclusion

Sunder John Boopalan in *Memory, Grief, and Agency: A Political Theological Account of Wrongs and Rites* examines how 'one's worth depends on a body's caste status' and how

‘indeed, persons do race and caste with, through, and to bodies’ (79). To put it simply, the complex structure of caste depends on performativity of bodies and bodies’ relations with other bodies produce gender identities. For Butler, this “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (xi-xii). The caste system as well as gender are regenerated, revalidated, rearticulated and reasserted through performativity.

The performativity is functioned through maintaining certain dynamic of “grammar of the body”. Boopalan refers “grammar of the body” as “socially conditioned rules by which bodies are habituated to ‘speak,’ as it were” and “these grammatical rules, when uncritically followed, condition dominant subjects’ actions and reactions to violence” (89). Joshua Samuel views “the grammar of the bodies are the socially conditioned embodied performativities of a subject in relation to herself and to others” (60). Caste system produces, sanctions, and asserts different rules of “the grammar” of caste bodies and “outcaste” bodies. Since, the focus is on “outcaste” bodies, so we need to interpret “the grammar” of “outcaste” bodies, rather in specifically “the grammar” of “outcaste” male bodies.

“Outcaste” male bodies’ relations with other “outcaste” female bodies and caste bodies generate their masculine identities. Hierarchically marked bodies occupy socially, culturally and politically privilege positions and therefore their bodies are worthy and counted. These hierarchically marked bodies or caste bodies according to dominant caste ideology, only matter and “outcaste” bodies or Dalit bodies do not matter. In this context, Sunder John Boopalan, a Dalit political theologian, argues:

In fact, Dalits are ranked so low in this dominant logic that they are bodies that do not count. Dalits, then, according to this story of human origin, are origin-less, having no legitimate place in the body politic. Wrongs done to them, according to this logic, are therefore wrongs done to “those who do not count.” Because, according to this religio-cultural logic, Dalit bodies are bodies that do not count, actions that may be called wrongs in another setting, when applied to Dalits, are often not deemed as “wrongs.” (78-79)

“Grammar” of Dalit bodies operates through social practices and norms of dominant Brahminical ideology and other cultural assimilations. This socially dominant ideology constructs masculinities of hierarchically marked bodies as well as unmarked bodies or Dalit bodies. In Dalit autobiographies, all writers share their bodily experiences, harassments, insults and violence. Like castes, masculinities also are hierarchally structured, whereby hierarchically marked castes exhibit their masculinities in relation to subordinate women and Dalit masculinities. Charu Gupta in *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* exhibits her view on Dalit masculinity:

Dalits have, in discourses around masculinity, remained vexingly invisible or have appeared only as “otherized” negative referents. In other words the entanglements of caste, Dalit identities, sexual ideology, and masculinity have not been much recognized in spite of a growing body of work on Dalits in colonial India. (112)

The studies of Dalit male body, manhood, their vulnerabilities and their masculinities are recent developments in critical discourses and academic arenas which are previously not recognised and taken into consideration. Dalit feminism identifies oppressions and injustice of women in the hands of Brahminical patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy, and remarkably it makes a distance regarding various issues with mainstream feminism in India. However, masculinity studies in Dalit discourse need critical examinations, analyses and interpretations.

Male Dalit writers represent various types of imageries of manhood in their autobiographies. Rejecting upper castes and colonial perspectives, they establish their own point of views experienced by and through bodies and minds. Balbir Madhopuri, a renowned writer in a forward of Bijender Singh’s edited volume entitled *Dalit Men’s Autobiography: A Critical Appraisal*, demonstrates:

The autobiographies of Dalit litterateurs portrayed a true picture of the contemporary Indian society before intelligentsia, the world over and were successful in projecting ugly face of the country. The bitter truth in these autobiographies, not indigent of anybody’s sympathy, inspired to fight for achieving the desired goal with a revolutionary zeal and argumentative point of view. (15)

Autobiographies are the first hand portrayal of their subjugations, sufferings, humiliations, pains, and their struggles. These subjugations, sufferings, physical torture, and humiliation have been conducted by the Brahminical hegemony, and Dalit subordinated masculinity is a type of gender configuration that borne out with intersects and interacts with Brahminical hegemonic masculinity and other types of dominant masculinities.

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