

EXPLORING CASTE AND IDENTITY: DALIT SELF-REPRESENTATION IN SURAJ YENGDE'S CASTE MATTERS

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine Dalit self-representation in the context of Suraj Yengde's Caste Matters, using a qualitative analytical approach to text. It questions the stereotyping of the Dalit speaker voice through autobiographical memory, conceptual naming, internal critique, Ambedkarite politics and transnational comparison. Five interwoven strategies are identified: experiential authority, reversal of objectifying discourse, differentiation within Dalit publics, transformation of stigma into political selfhood, and extending solidarity beyond India. Yengde's hybridity not only merely illustrates lived experience but makes it an epistemic claim. Its typologies of Dalit elites and middle classes, however, at times condense the various histories into moral ones. The article proposes that the strongest power of Caste Matters lies in relational self-representation, in which self-representation is answerable to collective emancipation, but not to the mediation of the Savarna. It consists of the ability to combine testimony, polemic, and social analysis in an anti-caste counter-public vocabulary.

Keywords: *Dalit Self-Representation¹, Caste Politics², Ambedkarite Thought³, Autobiographical Narratives⁴, Anti-Caste Discourse⁵.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 DALIT INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHT TO SELF-REPRESENTATION

But, Caste does not just exist in material form, it also exists as control over the descriptions of social reality. Ambedkar's call for the annihilation of caste thus entails an epistemic contestation of authority, as well as institutional change (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). To counter this struggle, Dalit self-representation calls for a gesture that shifts oppressed subjects from the position of object of sympathy, or administration, to that of producers of concepts, memory and political judgment.

1.2 The significant and context of Caste Matters

Yengde's Caste Matters is a blend of memoir, ethnographic observation, polemic and social criticism. It transforms the voice of Dalits to the voice of argument in contexts ranging from childhood memory to Dalit love, from neo-Dalit assertion to class differentiation, from capitalism to anti-Brahminism (Yengde, 2019). The hybridity of this book is a significant location for exploring identity as told, fought, and activated.

1.3 Research Problem and Scope

Preexisting commentary tends to focus on the book's claims or its structure rather than its voice as it creates Dalit identity. The full book is read as one interpretive case and rhetorical positioning, thematic recurrence, and individual authority/collective address tensions are analysed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Dalit Literary Movement, or the politics of representation?

Limble (2004) introduces the notion of Dalit aesthetics as the social truth of humiliation and revolt and Rege (2006) demonstrates how testimony can unsettle dominant archives through the making of a combined voice of caste and gender. Brueck (2014) and Gajarawala (2013) make this claim formally: Dalit writing is far from being mere experience waiting to be captured by the elite, it is a rhetorical and literary intervention which reveals the conventional realism of caste. Rawat and Satyanarayana (2016) thus present Dalit studies as a critique of disciplinary practices which subliminally marginalize Dalit intellectual output.

We need to be cautious of the undifferentiated voice of Dalit that can reproduce the male authority as cautioned by Guru (1995), and developed by Arya and Rathore (2020) and Paik (2022) who focus on embodied, gendered and performative knowledge. The anti-caste vocabulary is expanded by trauma and healing by Soundararajan (2022). Both representational autonomy and exclusions in the represented community necessitate analysis, when tackled together.

2.2 Contemporary scholarship focuses on the question of voice and identity

In contrast to Dalit political subjectivity being located outside modernity, Rao (2009) embeds it in modernity, in modern law, violence, and rights. Subramanian (2019) and Sukumar (2022) demonstrate how caste privilege becomes normalized as merit while Jodhka and Naudet (2023) define caste as being adaptive across the various institutions in the present day. Caste passing and camouflage, public self-naming (Dutt, 2019), are recurrent issues in personhood, as Satyanarayana and Lee demonstrate (2022). These studies make sense of the nature of declaring one's self Dalit as both personal revelation and structural diagnosis.

2.3 Critical Scholarship on Suraj Yengde and Caste Matters

The book is credited, however, with intervening in debates about being Dalit by Rodrigues (2020), who also challenges some historical and conceptual shifts. Nandgaye (2022) also appreciates its global experiential vision, but questions its unstable categories and lackluster explanation of Dalit love. The dichotomy between their disagreement implies the central enigma: criticism, which has tested the propositions, has not yet organized the representational operations through which autobiography turns into collective political knowledge.

The representation is linked to the institution's location in this scholarship. The form of the literature decides what Dalit speech will mean: knowledge, confession, evidence, anger, which register looks legitimate: universities, publishing cultures. The problem created is not just "visibility". Whether visibility leaves the order of

interpretation unaltered. The focus of Caste Matters is, therefore, on the hybrid voice's ability to shift the power of interpretation, rather than its adherence to a specific disciplinary genre.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Dalit Standpoint and Subaltern Perspectives

The Dalit perspective is introduced as a position of situated critical authority, rather than as a claim to truth. Guru and Sarukkai (2012) differentiate between theory and experience and also make a point of being responsible in representing the suffering of another. It thus poses the question of who says what, where, and how the experience is interpreted and made the basis of a claim that is open for collective questions.

3.2 Intersectionality and Identity Construction

Intersectionality makes caste identity less likely to be seen as monolithic and homogeneous (Crenshaw, 1989). The concealment, assertion, and discipline of Dalitness is modified by class mobility, gender, education, region, and diaspora. Identity is thus interpreted as a process of positioning in relation to others, not as a stable identity.

3.3 Self-Representation and Counter-Discourse

This is the vocabulary of dignity and action that Counter-discourse identifies as the conversion of imposed stigma. Kumar's interpretation of Ambedkarian equality makes the self-making equivalent to radical democracy (Kumar, 2015). Figure 1 combines standpoint, intersectional location, narrative strategy and political horizon.

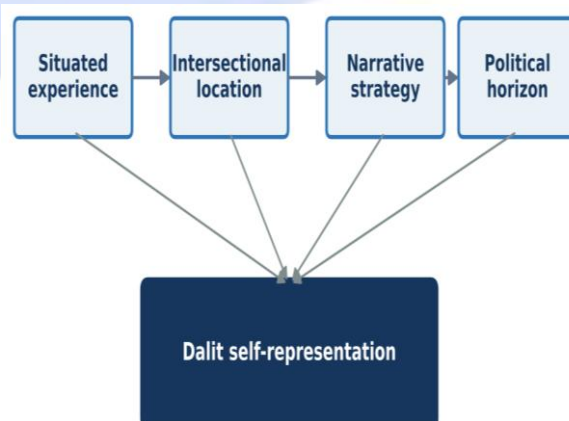


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for analysing Dalit self-representation.

4. RESEARCH GAP, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

4.1 Research Gap

The epistemic strength of Dalit testimony has been confirmed by scholarship, and the book's conceptual promise and instability have been pointed out by reviews. In Missing, a new book by British author J. M. Walter, the reader will find a comprehensive examination of the way in which Caste Matters is also created as a personal story, as a story of difference between communities, and as a story with universal parallels.

4.2 Research Objectives

The study recognizes the main self representational strategies that the book employs, discusses their political function, and explores the conflicts between individual voice, multiple publics of the Dalit community, and solidarity.

4.3 Research Questions

RQ1: How is Dalit experiential authority built by Yengde? RQ2: What are some of the narrative strategies that transform caste identity into counter-discourse? RQ3: How does the process of personal testimony to collective and transnational politics take place?

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This study is of interpretive, qualitative, case design. The population is the entire textual discourse of Caste Matters and the purposive sample is the entire 2019 English edition as it explicitly intersects lived experience with theorizing. The single information-rich text is sufficient, since the purpose is depth of analysis, not statistical generalization.

5.2 Selection of the Primary Text

The seven units (introduction and six chapters) were analysed as shown in Table 1. The unit of inference was not altered by excluding paratextual endorsements and later translations, so that authorial argument remained the unit of inference.

Table 1. Analytical corpus and units of analysis.

Analytic unit	Primary focus	Function in study
Introduction	Childhood memory; caste persistence	Establishes situated voice
Being a Dalit	Love, humour, universalism	Names affirmative Dalitness
Neo-Dalit Rising	Dignity, dissent, power	Frames political subjecthood
Many Shades of Dalits	Internal typologies	Tests communal heterogeneity
Dalit Middle Class	Mobility and obligation	Links class to accountability
Dalit Capitalism	Markets and emancipation	Interrogates economic agency
Brahmins against Brahminism	Allyship and structural change	Extends responsibility

5.3 Critical Textual and Thematic Analysis

consolidation, counter-reading and interpretive synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes monitored voice, pronouns, anecdotes, evaluative labels, conceptual coinages, and changes in voice and between personal and collective scales. The procedure is recorded in figure 2 without any frequencies being deemed as evidence of importance.

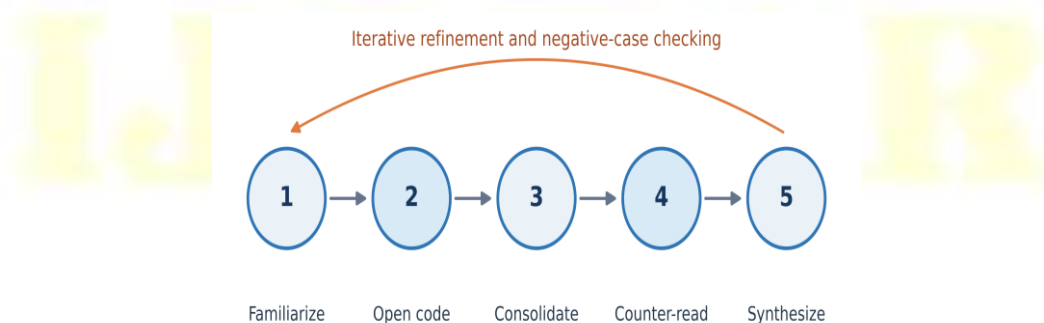


Figure 2. Iterative textual-analysis procedure.

5.4 Analytical Categories and Interpretive Procedure

Table 2 presented a codebook that correlated observable text features to theory. In what ways is the interpretation of reading through the negative case analysis of passages on Dalit elites, middle-class withdrawal, and capitalism? There was a link between claims and chapter locations that was established via an audit trail. No participants or private information was used, therefore there was no need for participants' consent; ethical care focused on contextual quotation, non-extractive interpretation, and transparent limitations.

Table 2. Coding framework and interpretive questions.

Code family	Textual indicators	Interpretive question
Experiential authority	Memory, embodiment, first-person judgment	How does experience authorize analysis?
Counter-naming	Reclaimed terms, conceptual coinages	How is stigma reversed?
Internal differentiation	Classifications, critique, obligation	Who is included or judged?
Political selfhood	Dignity, Ambedkar, power, liberation	How does identity become action?
Relational solidarity	Allies, race, diaspora, universality	How does Dalitness travel?

Analytical credibility was sought by multiple readings of the entire text, definitions, and the comparison of supporting and refuting texts. Interpretative validity was determined by the consistency of the cited locations or codes, themes and conclusions rather than the inter-rater statistics, which would give the impression that the reflexive interpretation is observer neutral. Reliability in this context refers to the ability to view the corpus boundaries, code families and inferential path by another researcher. These claims were only stated in the text and not extended to the Dalits' overall experience.

6. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

6.1 Transforms the capacity of Dalit community to assert voice and experience

The first childhood memory is more than just establishing the identity of the narrator. It makes the body of the person injured visible as an archive that reveals the common violence of caste. In the book, Yengde switches back and forth between a first-person perspective and analysing the situation, rejecting the dichotomy of witness and analyst (Yengde 2019). This movement is a foundation for all subsequent themes as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic findings across Caste Matters.

Theme	Representative locations	Self-representational effect
Experiential authority	Introduction; Being a Dalit	Turns memory into caste knowledge
Counter-discourse	Dalit love; humour; universalism	Replaces deficit with ethical agency
Internal differentiation	Many Shades; Middle Class	Makes community self-critical
Political selfhood	Neo-Dalit Rising	Joins dignity, dissent, and power
Relational solidarity	Capitalism; anti-Brahminism	Redistributes responsibility beyond Dalits

Dalitness shows up in the imposed location and the selected affiliation. Education and mobility change the context of exposure to caste, but not its existence. The criticism of token, elite and self-absorbed positions is a

critique of identity as an ethics of community. It's a force of accountability, and it's a danger of turning a lot of different paths into fixed moral types.

6.2 Challenging Dominant Representations of Dalit Experience

Thoughts like Dalit love, Dalit humour oppose the following of thoughts that are centred solely around injury.

They call intimacy, survival and creativity political capacities. Figure 3 shows the way counter-naming relates to collective agency, not to the denial of suffering.

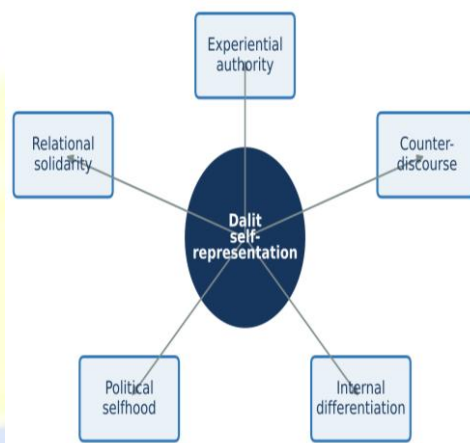


Figure 3. Relational map of the five findings.

6.3 Ambedkarite Consciousness and Political Selfhood

Ambedkar is a way, a reminder, and a promise. The neo-Dalit subject is not a grateful recipient, but a permanent victim; the former is driven by dignity; the latter by institution building; and the latter by emancipatory assessment of democracy. Self-representation becomes then programmatic, but at times the compression of slogans runs ahead of history.

6.4 Globalization of Dalit Identity and Solidarity

Comparisons with race and diaspora expand the audience and position castes in international systems of racial hierarchy. The move establishes solidarity but does not make equivalence. Figure 4 represents the interpretative tendency of the book as a whole, and the points are not quantitative, but an assertion of agency, a collective claim, a transnational connection.

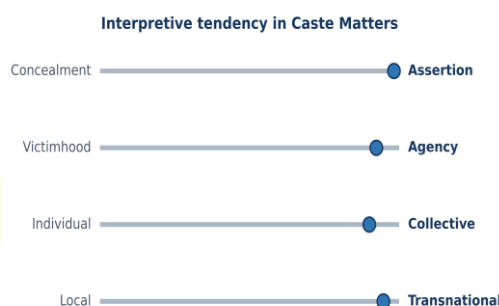


Figure 4. Interpretive identity continuums; positions are non-statistical.

Form strengthens these results. Form upholds these results. There is a voice that is intimate and prosecutorial as memory and typology, historical reference, exhortation and comparison move at lightning speed. At times the shift undermines transitions, but at other times it is able to withstand the demand for Dalit knowledge to be

delivered in one authorized academic register. Caste's adaptability, repeated, provides them thematic continuity, and direct address makes them subjects rather than spectators. It is not, therefore, the unevenness of the book that matters so much as the complexity of being able to speak as one, theorize a community and address a caste-charged public at the same time.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Self-Representation as Counter-Hegemonic Practice

The results indicate that Yengde's self-narration is epistemic rather than autobiographical: it is about the terms by which caste can be known. It helps to nurture Dalit literary scholarship on counter-archives, and to bring it into public sociology. The book begins with Dalit judgment rather than dominant narratives of translation for recognition of Dalit pain.

7.2 Individual Experience and Collective Dalit Identity

The idea of converting 'I' to 'Dalit' is an idea that not only brings political reach but also the tension in the paper. The shift from 'I' to 'Dalit' is not only a political reach but also the central tension of the paper. When rhetorical types seem to be sociologically exhaustive as in Nandgaye's case, his concern that the categories proliferate is well warranted. However, Rodrigues's foregrounding of the urgency of the intervention seems to account for the polemical compression (Rodrigues, 2020). These gains and limits are distinguished in Table 4.

Table 4. Interpretive contributions and critical tensions.

Productive tension	Contribution	Critical limit
Testimony / theory	Experience generates concepts	Anecdote may be overextended
Unity / differentiation	Community becomes self-critical	Typologies can homogenize
Mobility / obligation	Success remains socially accountable	Class histories receive limited nuance
Markets / emancipation	Economic agency enters debate	Structural capital remains undertheorized
Solidarity / analogy	Caste enters global conversation	Comparisons require historical specificity

7.3 Contribution to Contemporary Caste Discourse

The unique contribution of the book is a relational identity model: Dalitness as a remembering, disagreeing, binding, and allied identity. Self-representation is not therefore a private authenticity. It is a world-making that is accountable, that creates values, and that assigns anti-caste responsibility to Dalits and non-Dalits differently.

Simple celebration is also included in this interpretation. Self-representation can raise an issue with an external domination and establish an internal normalcy on how to be truly committed. Representational authority is not the proper response, nor is immunity from disagreement. It is to assess the responsibly of the text that sets limits to its point of view.

7.4 Scholarly Implications, Limitations and Conclusion

Caste Matters foregrounds Dalit identity as experiential knowledge, constructs counter-naming as Dalit Ambedkarite identity, internal critique, and solidarity. This study points to the need for plural and reflexive self-representation. The scope of its limitations indicates that comparative studies with other translations, gender, generations and geographical context can be explored in the future, thus enhancing sociocultural studies and knowledge of the experiences of castes.

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