

Critique of Everyday Dalit Marginalisation Across Terrains in Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain*

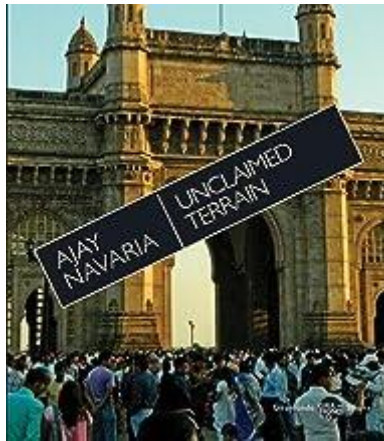
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Abstract

This paper delves into the portrayal of Dalit everyday experiences in Ajay Navaria's short story collection, *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013). The study examines how Navaria's narratives draw from both real-life incidents and fictional storytelling to shed light on the struggles faced by Dalits in both rural and urban contexts. Through these stories, Navaria portrays the struggles of Dalits in rural and urban settings, critiquing the failures of modernity and the secular nation to provide social equality. The paper discusses how Navaria navigates the tensions between social activism and the art of literature, particularly within the context of Dalit literature. His stories reveal the complexities of the urban Dalit subject, caught between the allure of economic opportunities and the persistent anxiety of caste-based discrimination in the urban spaces. Furthermore, the study explores how Navaria's narratives reflect upon the failures of modernity and the secular nation in delivering on their promises

of social equality. Despite the rhetoric of equality and freedom, the contemporary nation-state continues to marginalise Dalits, leaving them to confront fear and exclusion in their everyday lives. In conclusion, Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* offers a compelling critique of the prevailing socio-political landscape. By delving into these complex themes, Navaria's stories call for an inclusive public sphere and underscore the need to redefine the concept of nation as a daily referendum based on shared suffering and collective consensus, ultimately paving the way for a more equitable and just society.

Keywords: Ajay Navaria, *Unclaimed Terrain*, Dalit experience, Dalit consciousness, everyday discrimination, social equality.

“Ever since the family bought the horse, the Darbars had been threatening Pradip and Kalubhai. Once Kalubhai had even decided to sell the horse but Pradip cried for days and Kalubhai reluctantly agreed to keep the horse. In fact, Kalubhai was threatened last week. The Darbars told him to sell the horse as Dalits are not meant to ride horses,” said Himmatbhai” (Dhar, “Family Alleges”).

The above quoted statement is not extracted from the short stories which comprise the collection *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013) by Ajay Navaria, but are taken from a news report which had published an interaction with the kin of the Dalit boy from Timbi village in Umralla (Gujarat), who was killed by the Kshatriya caste Darbar community members last march for daring to own and ride a horse.

The above incident is almost a spectral repetition of a similar incident in the story “Subcontinent” in Ajay Navaria’s short story collection, where the protagonist Siddharth is witness to the incident where the wedding party of the Dalit boy Bhima is disrupted by a mob of upper-castes, who terrorise the party into going ahead without the ceremonial horse. This is ostensibly a punishment for breaking the “traditions of millennia” (93), with the upper-caste mob collectively acting as the vigilante protectors of the caste hierarchies and status quo in the village setting. While the groom in the story is spared from any fatal consequences, the pall of violence that lies over the everyday life of a Dalit in the village setting is palpable throughout Navaria’s short story collection. The *everyday* of the Dalit in the village, as well

as Dalit as an urban migrant are the subject matter of these stories with the two terrains marking the territories of the traditional and the modern respectively.

While the following two frameworks work in contiguous overlaps and continuities, the first part of this paper focuses on the intervention staged by Hindi Dalit Literary sphere in the ‘mainstream’ literary tradition, and Navaria’s contribution in the former; followed by an examination of the dynamics of urban migration with which the Dalit subject is inserted into the urban capitalist modernity, and its concomitant failures to deliver a caste-less Universal subjecthood which was promised in the idea of a modern secular nation. The latter theme, as discussed by Aditya Nigam in the essay “Secularism, Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique”, forms part of the larger critique of modernity and the nation in Dalit literature—specifically, the “two great artefacts of political modernity in India – secularism and the nation” (4256). The acclaimed Dalit writer Ajay Navaria through his stories highlights the shortcomings of the modern nation-state’s public sphere which despite the language of equality, freedom, and dignity, has failed to provide the claims of modernity to the Dalit who is presented in his stories as struggling with elements of fear and anxiety in the contemporary nation-state.

In the twentieth century, there have been notable literary contributions of Dalit self-assertion as in ‘Acchut ki Shikayat’ written in 1914 in the Bhojpuri dialect by Hira Dom, a prominent proponent of Dalit consciousness in north India. However, the contemporary efflorescence in the Hindi Dalit literary tradition emerged only in the 1980s with the publication of early autobiographies, poetry, and short stories of eminent writers like Omprakash Valmiki and Mohandas Naimaishray. These writers were indebted to and paid tribute in their writings to the Dalit literary tradition of western India, which had developed earlier and had an influence on the former.

Laura Brueck in her seminal 2014 book on the emergence of Hindi Dalit literature *Writing Resistance*, reads a coterminous emergence of a Dalit Counterpublic space along with the literary efflorescence. This Counterpublic space becomes the site where Dalit literary voices along with readers and responders engage in productive debate and discussion which might otherwise be silenced by the hegemonic forces of universalist nationalism of the dominant public sphere, which refuses to recognize the distinct identities and perspectives of the Dalits. Two examples of such organizations given by Brueck are the Bhartiya Dalit

Sahitya Akademi and Dalit Lekhak Sangh – the latter organization also consisting of Delhi-based Ajay Navaria.

Navaria in the past also has been actively engaged in the intervention of the Dalit perspective in the mainstream discussion of literature as is seen in his presence in the Jaipur Literature Festival during 2010 and 2012. He was also invited by Rajendra Yadav to edit issues of *Hans* magazine twice, with one issue focusing on themes emerging in the current Hindi literatures, and the other one focusing specifically on Dalit matters.

While the real-life incident in the opening quotation finds a haunting precedent in Navaria's story, the author is deeply aware of what Laura Brueck calls the tension between social activism and the art of literature, especially in the context of Dalit literature, which has for a long time derived as well as departed from the realist mode of tradition, as examined in detail by the critic Toral Jatin Gajarawala. However, the complex boundary between characterization through archetypes and fully rounded characters is the challenge taken up by a writer of literature of protest and resistance. Navaria, who often incorporates in his writing experimental modes of narration thus pushing his works to a modernist stance critical of modernity in which the casteized body is 'othered', writes:

“This minimal activism could irritate some, but on an artistic level a more activist stance than this would be the death of the work for me. The integrity of the work should not be compromised, maybe this is why I chose other areas for stronger social critique.” (qtd. in Brueck 124)

However, this does not imply that Dalit consciousness, which could be understood as a position of strategic essentialism, is diluted in his texts. The contemporary understanding of Dalit Chetna or consciousness revolves around the Ambedkarite principles of political liberation, renunciation of Hindu identity as well as a struggle towards caste eradication from Hindu society—and many of these tropes are visible in Navaria's stories like “Tattoo” and “Sacrifice”. While prioritizing the Dalit consciousness, or the Dalitness of Navaria's text, Brueck reads these stories as the diversification of the Dalit Aesthetic which departs from the realism bordering on sociological to a laudable strategy of “structural innovation, including obfuscating language that creates a sense of alienation, as well as regular construction of flashbacks, sequences of both narrative and traumatic memory, and liminal temporalities” (125).

The reader encounters the above discussed innovative structural techniques in the stories like “Sacrifice” where the narratorial ‘I’ shifts from the subject of Kalu to the city-based Ambedkar-follower Avinash. Avinash struggles with his father’s rooting in the structures of caste within the village where discrimination between sub castes within the lower caste becomes a source of conflict between the father and the son – with the son resisting his father’s understanding of caste with an assertion of Ambedkarite pan-Dalit identity. The story opens with the episode of a kid goat being chopped off described in linguistic terms which employ the technique of alienation to present a shock value in the narrative with a corporeality which is often silenced or goes unrepresented in upper caste narratives.

Navaria’s deployment of conventions of literary modernism to effectively present a reconsideration of the promise of modernity and the secular foundations of the nation-state to deliver Dalits from marginalization becomes prominent in the story “Hello Premchand”, which is an “Uttar Katha”, or answering tale to the archetypal helpless characterization of Dalits in Premchand’s oeuvre. This particular revisioning in the tale functions in a larger framework of the Dalit reclamation of the realist writing mode, as well as a condemnation of the stalwart of Hindi fiction and social realism by members of Dalit Sahitya Akademi who staged a burning of his novel *Rangabhumi* in 2004. The example of Premchand’s fiction is also used to define the contours of the essence of Dalit consciousness, with the sympathetic portrayal of Dalits as staged in his fiction -which now finds a presence in all major school and university syllabuses – deferring and denying the conceptualization of a Dalit ‘subjecthood’, for there is no agency which stems from this humiliation, as highlighted by Gopal Guru.

The problematic representation of the Dalit archetypes in Hindi realist fiction of Premchand has also been noted by Toral Jatin Gajarawala in her seminal text *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, from which the following succinct description of Premchand’s oeuvre has been taken:

“In addition to the material critique of misrepresentation, there is the question of the way in which the realist text configures its ethnographic authority on the basis of repetition of caste-based names, casteized paradigms, and the circumscribed narrative arc of the Dalit figure” (8).

Premchand's seminal 1936 speech 'Aim of Literature' which emphasized that the idea of literature was to defend the oppressed has been critiqued by the Dalit intellectuals for his bent towards Gandhian idealism and faith in the village economy. This critique is positioned in the fact that the more radical Ambedkarite faith in modern institutions had gained substantial leverage in the times of Premchand but was not engaged with by the literary stalwart.

In Navaria's story "Hello Premchand", many literary techniques like intertextuality are employed to affect a restoration of agency to the character of Mangal, the young boy who goes on to become a civil servant in the post-independence time frame, as well as to the character of Budhiya who does not die in childbirth and neglect in this re-writing. However, the new modes of subordination and practising caste hierarchies which emerge in the post-independence period are represented in the latter part of the story collection, in which the characters are often shown to move towards the urban metropolis. The revisioning of Premchand's story which ends on the note of the lookalike of Ambedkar, Premchand and the narrator heralding the new nation – places the story in the contemporary period of post Mandal Commission developments. This period has witnessed, as Nigam notes, an increase in the language which elides caste oppression by conflating caste with class in a hierarchization in the capitalist urban sphere which naturalizes extreme poverty and deprivation (4256). The language of class and merit is employed to divert focus from the casteist divisions of the society, and to instil self-doubt in the Dalit subject who might have received benefits from affirmative action policies, as seen in the stories "Subcontinent", "Tattoo" and "New Custom".

The move towards urban modernity guarded by secular institutions which was posited as a solution to structural casteism by Ambedkar is also assumed to be a solution by the Dalit migrants to the urban city space, but it fails to deliver the promise of modernity in the form of a casteless universal subject in the secular capital driven urban spaces. In the story "Subcontinent", the "same snakes" still hissed despite acquisition of monetary wealth by the upwardly mobile Dalit protagonist (100). While the city offers anonymity, it also becomes the cause of alienation from one's community as well as self which becomes fragmented in its loss of communal memory. The urban Dalit subject in these stories occupies the liminal space between the city and the village in his struggle to find a place – with the urban space constantly marking the Dalit body in various ways ranging from 'the quota guy' to the

scientifically false anthropological derision directed at the Dalit protagonist in the story “Scream”. The following quote from the story “Scream” in which the protagonist is debased by an anthropology Professor in the city-based university captures the everyday humiliation directed at the Dalit subject even in urban spaces.

“One day in anthropology class, Kulkarni Sir was lecturing on human races. When he came to the Negro race, he looked directly at me and said, “You! Stand up.” He pointed at me, smiled and said, “Look, here is the Negro race. Thick lips, wide nose, prominent brow, round skull. But with more height” (163).

The city which offers economic reward for ‘labor’ which acquires multiple meaning in the economy of the city, and an option of anonymity of caste, is also the space where the anxiety of caste is still very much palpable, even if by the error of omission as in the hiding of caste identity by the character Subhash Kumar Paswan in an upscale gym in the Khan market area in the story “Tattoo”.

In the Counterpublic sphere discussed earlier, Premchand was relegated to the margins by figures like Valmiki, for failing to recognize the primacy of caste over class in the Dalit worldview—class is a symptom of caste inequality, and not necessarily its cause. If class positions were a solution to the caste problem as the conflation of the two categories in upper caste writings suggests, the move to the city and a successful insertion into capitalist modernity would have rested the matter. But it is not, as is visible in the Navaria’s characters who have become successful in the city like Siddharth in “Subcontinent” and the Deputy General Manager Narottam Saroj in the story “Yes Sir” but are still rendered to the margins of the civil society discourse as the ‘reservation’ candidates whenever the dominant public opinion finds an outlet for expression. As also noted by Laura Bruueck, these dilemmas are the main thematics of Navaria’s fiction:

“Navaria’s stories make it clear that the transition from village to city, from feudal caste hierarchies to the pseudo-equality of a secular modernity is fraught with conflict. Significantly, this conflict is domestic and personal; it is manifested in intergenerational divisions, misunderstandings, and aggression, or with a pervasive sense of alienation from oneself, one’s community and one’s environment. These stories are not cautionary tales from the dangers of leaving family, home, and tradition for a stake in the promise of casteless, classless, undifferentiated, and “universal” subjecthood of the modern nation state, but rather are introspective

meditations on the losses of self and community that necessarily come with doing so” (125-126).

Thus, the Dalit experience of the everyday in the city becomes a critique of the secular nation which has failed in its promises of social equality to its subjects. In this socio-political context, there is a need to re-invoke the concept of nation as “a daily referendum”, defined by Ernest Renan and accepted by Ambedkar. In this nineteenth century articulation of the concept of the nation-state, the guiding principles are not race, religion or language but a daily consensus of its people to come together and participate in the common present, in which they are held together by a past of commonly shared suffering. While the Dalits have often been at the receiving end of violence in the history of the nation, a secular and democratic functioning of the nation cannot be envisaged in the absence of an inclusive public sphere; and the struggles to achieve that has been notably fictionalized from the Dalit perspective in Navaria’s short stories in the collection *Unclaimed Terrain*.

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