

(Re)casting Caste: Dalit Literary Consciousness in Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* and Goyu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*

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Introduction

This article, dealing with Indian Dalit literatures, cultures and politics, requires a preliminary note on the background and positioning of its author. I am new to the field, my research area being Australasian literature, despite parallels existing with India. Genetic studies, for instance, have found similarities amongst the indigenous populations of the two countries (Yong). The geneticist basis of this claim however calls for caution. Rather, it is in the sphere of culture that concurrences reside. Indian Adivasis and Aboriginal Australians share comparable histories of dispossession and marginalization, but also struggle and resistance to colonial and neo-colonial structures of oppression. Like Dalits, both groups do not amount to a unified entity, and are split into numerous constituencies across linguistic, geographical, and/or religious lines. The strategic harnessing of Dalitness also refers to the experience of distinct discriminatory practices, and to the formulation of political agendas of collective liberation. Popularized by the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra in the 1970s, the term "Dalit" has been reclaimed as a means of self-empowerment and a badge of pride. As K. Srinivasulu asserts, Dalitness denotes "a community of oppressed castes with specific experience of being treated as untouchables and being humiliated through the conscious denial of self-respect and honour by the caste Hindus" (30; qtd. in Satyanarayana 446).

Being a non-Dalit, I remain wary of the extent to which I am able to claim authority and feel entitled to partake in, and write about, Dalit issues. The policing of Dalitness by a section of Dalit intellectuals is to be measured against the degree of narratorial authenticity. It remains a highly contested terrain that has crystallized around the literary figure of India's revered writer Munshi Premchand. As Ajay Navaria's translator Laura Brueck explicates: "Dalit literary traditions are determining and protecting their own socio-political identities – not only as opposed to the standards of the mainstream Indian literary sphere but also as distinct from other regional language Dalit literary traditions" (62). My reason for selecting two Dalit texts from widely differing historical and cultural contexts grows out of a desire to approach Dalitness as a Pan-Indian *movement* able to transcend

regional/identitarian particularisms, without wishing to ignore the legitimacy and specificity of the local/private dimension of these texts.

This article, focusing on caste, is not blind to the risks of sectarianism within the Dalit movement. It thus operates at the intersection of caste, gender, class, race, religion and nationalism, building upon both Dalit and non-Dalit scholarship as well as drawing from a postcolonial and subaltern analytical lexicon. Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013) deals with the urban Dalit male individual's city-life angst and draws from both a Modernist and Realist literary repertoire to achieve its avant-gardist aims: "Navaria's questioning of the efficacy of modern life for urban, middle-class Dalits – in other words, whether modernity has delivered its promise of freedom from oppressive caste hierarchies – is an important innovation in Dalit literary discourse" (Brueck 128). Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* (2012) brings together stories, or rather fragments, chronicling in the mode of the epic folk tale the microcosm of her native village in the southern state of Telangana. Here, the novelty lies in the way Shyamala "seems to inaugurate a new genre of 'little stories' that speak of, in feminist scholar Susie Tharu's words, the 'world of the little, subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions'" (qtd. in Lalita 251). Shyamala's defiant tone finds inspiration in the role played by Dalit women in the historical struggle for a Telanganite identity, at odds with the stereotypical representation of femaleness as both powerless and helpless.

This said, the immanent political character of Dalit literature ought not to entail the subordination of aesthetic matters, which both Dalit and non-Dalit critics have insisted on (Brueck; Limbale; Valmiki). This article thus strives to walk the tightrope between political content and aesthetic experimentation so as to avoid reducing Dalit literature to a straightforward "document of pain, as a weapon of struggle and a force of democratisation in the cultural arena" (Hunt 212). Dalit fiction became from an early stage a privileged means of expression for the Dalit social movement when conceptualized as *testimonio* or *manifesto*, although "with the rise of institutionalised Dalit politics, Dalit politics and Dalit literature began to take increasingly separate whilst mutually supportive paths" (Hunt 6). Using Gayatri Spivak's distinction between political representation (*vertretung*) and literary re-presentation (*darstellung*), Hunt maintains that the latter allows for a subtler, more intricate negotiation of the problematics of Dalit identity politics, provided we take stock of the fact that "the majority of the [Dalit] community remains illiterate and thus, to 'listen' to Dalit literature at all also implies a position of privilege and power" (Hunt 13). This ability to hear the subaltern's voice, as I will show, is rendered even more complex by translation.

As K. Satyanarayana observes in his essay "Categories of Caste, Class, and Telugu Dalit Literature," there persists within Indian literature as a whole a schism between, on the one hand, mainstream belief that "consciousness expressed in poetry [and fiction] determines the character of literature, not caste or religious identity" (453), and, on

the other, that “self-representation is one of the central features of the new mobilizations of the populations of Dalits and other social groups” (454). Ajay Navaria’s and Goyu Shyamala’s collections of short stories show that the two perspectives are not necessarily mutually incompatible. Although springing from divergent locales (Navaria’s Hindi/North Indian city, and Shyamala’s Telugu/South Indian rural, settings), both collections foreground the discursive, iterative and *performative* nature of caste. Hence, the recounting of caste is also its re-casting as part of the realm of fiction and imaginative creativeness. While negotiation, as these two authors suggest, unavoidably involves mutual contamination and complicity, their denunciation of the many ills of modern India (rampant consumerism, materialism and urbanization, political and religious corruption, or the perpetuation of untouchability) highlights how Dalit literary consciousness or *chetnā* ultimately does not aim at the consolidation of a supposedly caste-blind, middle-class identity, but rather seeks “to struggle against the social system of caste hierarchy, and second, to create a new social system in its place” (qtd. in Hunt 215).

Writing “Dalit Brahmin” Consciousness: Ajay Navaria’s *Unclaimed Terrain*

The growth of Dalit literature and of a Dalit literary consciousness (also known as Dalit Renaissance) from the 1960s onwards is intimately linked to the growth in political assertiveness on the part of Dalit subjectivities, and to the resurgence, in the aftermath of decolonization, of the centrality of caste with regards to the problems of Indian modernity. Emblematic hero figure of the Dalit movement and initiator of the Indian constitution Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar believed that the complete abolition of the centuries-old caste system and the inclusion of a large section of the population into the nation-building project was a pre-condition for India’s access to modernity. Although Article 15 of the Indian Constitution officially banned the caste system, its practical continuation in a postcolonial era led Ambedkar to convert to Buddhism shortly before his death in 1956 as a means of protesting against caste-based Hinduism. Ambedkar’s radical anti-caste politics differs from that of another key figure of Indian modernity – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi’s upper-caste Hindu background may explain why the latter believed the caste system needed reforming from within, instead of overthrowing from without. Ambedkar’s refusal to join the independence movement alongside Gandhi and his appeal to the British colonizer for Dalit support were premised upon the belief that for Dalits, Indian independence would only mean substituting one oppressor with another. Britain’s creation of a separate Dalit electorate in India was seen as being part of a “divide and rule policy” (Sadangi 126) that allowed for British retention of power.

Part of the role and significance of Dalit literature, I would argue, is to contest the universalist claims of Indian modernity by foregrounding the allegedly pre-modern, “feudal” category of caste, and, in doing so, to point at the inherently casteist nature of the Indian postcolonial nation-state. As Aditya Nigam similarly contends, “the insurrection of little selves [Dalits, but also women, indigenous Adivasis or workers] marks a global crisis of modernity and its great project of realizing the emancipation of Universal Man – embodied in the abstract citizen, unmarked by any identity” (4258; qtd. in Brueck 150). As will be seen in this section, Navaria’s fiction further interrogates the role and significance of the emergence of a distinct class of Dalit *évolués* cut off in part from their subaltern roots. Despite his radical anti-casteism, some view Ambedkar – not without a grain of irony – as “an icon of India’s modern literati looking for a safe, manageable icon of Dalit pride in the shape of a constitutional lawyer, liberal democrat, and product of Columbia University” (Nandy xv). While maintaining self-representation and the autonomy of caste as a social category, Dalit literati have tended to ignore the issue of class, remaining wary of Marxism’s totalizing proclivity to subsume caste under the umbrella of the class struggle. Yet their wariness may also mask a reluctance to launch into a self-criticism of the limits of Dalit identity politics in a post-Ambedkar era, especially regarding the efficacy of affirmative action (known as “Reservation”).¹

Ajay Navaria was born in Delhi to a Rajasthani family. His grandfather had migrated from a rural village near Jaipur to Delhi in 1942. Navaria is the author of one published novel and two collections of short stories, and some of his fiction has been anthologized in English (Satyanarayana & Tharu). The collection of short stories, *Unclaimed Terrain* (translated into English), also mentions how Navaria is associated with the premier Hindi literary journal, *Hans*. Navaria writes in Hindi, a language that emerged as India’s national language in the 1920-1940 period, known as the ‘Golden Age’ of modern Hindi literature (Orsini 1), thanks in part to the figure of Premchand (1880–1936). Hindi’s stated aim was to unite the nation (*rāṣṭra*) under a common cultural identity (*jāti*). Literary reformists such as Mahāvīr Prasād Dvivedī (1864–1938) sought to standardize Hindi by means of erasing all colloquialisms alluding to caste, religion, or profession, and by promoting instead a ‘pure’ Hindi (*śuddh*) conveying ideals of “rural harmony”: “Differences of caste and status were thus pushed outside (written) language” (Orsini 12).

In the process of being established as a “national” language, Hindi also marginalized other Indian vernacular languages. It nevertheless remained below English in the hierarchy, as the latter was associated with the colonizer and the cultural elite. I will return later in this section to the subject of language, translation, and to Navaria’s “heteroglossic” fiction. *Unclaimed Terrain* starts as a father initiates his son to the sacrificial slaughtering of a baby goat destined to be sold in the marketplace. The violence of the act, depicted in gory details, is a shocking, traumatic experience for the seven-year-old boy, and is part of a rich bestiary epitomizing the “species-ism” which lies at the

heart of the caste system. In Darwinist fashion, the boy fatalistically resigns himself to the fact that “it’s the weaker species’ lot to end up on the plates of the stronger” (13). Kalu (the boy’s name) belongs to an inferior caste; he is an “SC” (acronym for Scheduled Caste).² SCs like Kalu live a world apart from such respectable groups as Brahmins or Baniyas or Thakurs. Like his father, Kalu must become a butcher, considered dirty work, and quit his studies.

The subject of caste remains taboo yet stands on everyone’s lips, creeping up surreptitiously in the course of a conversation like a “vulture” (Navaria 13) with its prey. After a few pages, the story shifts to the city and to Kalu’s brother Avinash. Such spatio-temporal leaps are characteristic of Modernist style. Navaria’s prose itself consists of “regular constructions of flashbacks, sequences of both narrative and traumatic memory, and liminal temporalities” (Brueck 125) that create a sense of alienation. Unlike Kalu, Avinash did not become a butcher, renounced Hindu rituals, moved to the city to mix with self-educated Ambedkarite Leftists, married a woman from a different *varna* (caste) and went so far as to change his name. Avinash may earn the “bitterly ironic [epithet] “Dalit Brahmin” [...] for Dalits who try to distance themselves from their caste identity, or who put more emphasis on personal material success than on community improvement, perhaps inhabiting a middle class or elite class position” (Brueck 68). However, Navaria offers us a much more nuanced portrayal of Avinash’s conscience, beset and split by filial duties and a desire to reconcile with his father, as well as shaped by a political awareness of the necessity to free Dalits from caste oppression.

“Yes Sir,” the second story of the collection, stages Tiwari, presented to the reader as a “peon in a public sector office of the Indian government” (Navaria 49). Tiwari’s boss Narottam comes from a lower caste and is promoted thanks to affirmative action policy, or “Reservation.” As Tiwari disgruntledly mutters when rudely summoned to his boss’s office at the start of the story: “He was made an officer under the quota – the pawn becomes a knight, and there’s pride in his stride! If it weren’t for the quota, he’d be pushing a broom somewhere” (Navaria 46-7). The story subverts typical Dalit narratives at the level of character representation. Whereas “the polarization of oppressor and oppressed,” which Brueck sees as “the predominant narrative structure in Dalit literature” (81) is respected here, roles are in effect reversed: a Dalit, rather than a non-Dalit, is the oppressor. Subsequently, there is no melodramatic dualism of “Good Dalits Vs. Bad Brahmins.” Navaria privileges instead a Realist/Modernist plot: Narottam’s apparent arrogance and feeling of superiority serve to blur boundaries and diffuse power relations.

Narottam’s characterization fits Dalit Panthers founder Arun Dangle’s definition of the “Dalit Brahmin” as “educated, yet beset by an inferiority complex [and as] opportunistic, unmoved by the communal spirit of freedom and struggle of the Dalit movement” (Brueck 69). Transpiring from the antagonism between Tiwari and Narottam is a caste-based division of labor between manual and intellectual work central (although not unique) to the Indian capitalistic

context. Added to it is a division between country and city, where in the former, hierarchies are respected, ancestral customs perpetuated and Brahmins like Tiwari, son of Pandit Shivnarayan Tiwari, “shown the reverence that was his due” (Navaria 49). Tiwari must now show the same reverence towards his boss. When the toilets in his boss’s office get blocked and no “untouchable” Dalit is at hand to clean the mess, Tiwari readily obliges Narottam after obtaining a promotion, for “what shame,” Tiwari asks, “is there in work?” (Navaria 64).

I have pondered elsewhere (Giffard-Foret) over the “excremental” as a recurring motif in Indian literature, when contrasted with “ornamental” idealism or romanticism – this in a country where a vast majority of the population still has no access to sanitation, and where “human scavenging” (i.e. manual removal of excreta from so-called “dry” toilets without a flush) persists as an ancient discriminatory practice reserved for the lower castes, despite its official ban after independence. As one character assesses elsewhere in the collection, “[t]hese societies have been bound by the cycle of master-servant rituals for thousands of years...[and] will take time to break” (Navaria 151). Tiwari’s earlier remark that wage-money in exchange of work, even of the most debasing sort, should not be scoffed at, however, points towards radical transformations in people’s consciousnesses as postcolonial India is increasingly integrated into, and is expected to play a leading role in, the world capitalist economy. As the early Lenin once professed in a piece on the “Nation Question,” “capitalism’s broad and rapid development of the productive forces ... sweep[s] away all the old, medieval, caste, parochial, petty-national, religious and other barriers” (45).

For subaltern castes in particular, the anonymous space of the megacity can offer a refuge against the parochialism of village life and constitute a vehicle of social mobility: by stripping off their background, Dalits transform into nameless proletarians and aspiring self-made capitalists. As a Dalit *evolué*, Narrotam’s identity straddles a wide array of often-oxymoronic enunciative postures. Navaria makes here full use of the heteroglossic structure of fictional prose. The “dialogic” nature of the novel is arguably made even more intense by the more condensed format of the short story form. For Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, heteroglossia consisted of “the collision between differing points of views on the world” (360), and meant the breaking up of the unicity of language, to be understood in a broad, sociolinguistic sense (to signify social status, age, or sex). While heteroglossia is found missing in the English translation, in the Hindi version, Narottam is able to strategically deploy his mastery of linguistic codes at Tiwari’s expense via the selective intrusion of English words into his speech, “wielding his knowledge of the water purification technology of the upper middle class household, the pop culture knowledge of TV commercials, and the sneering disdain for the misplaced use of brand names for modern products like toothpaste and detergent by the less educated” (Brueck 120).

Announced as the lead story in Ajay Navaria’s collection, “Scream” follows the steps of the first-person narrator, forced to leave

his father's village for the town of Nagpur after facing humiliation and receiving a thrashing from the local landlord's son. Yet in college there, students keep reminding him of his caste, his anthropology teacher even comparing him to a black person in a Fanonesque moment of psychic interpellation: "He pointed at me, smiled and said: "Look, here is the Negro race" (Navaria 163). "Scream" works against an over-simplified view of the cityscape as the repository of emancipation and of a caste-blind society. Navaria constantly shifts emphasis by throwing his character into simultaneous fits of elation and despondency, and by embracing a (post)modernist skepticism towards the signifiers of urban life. In so doing, Navaria heralds "the crisis of identity that befalls middle-class Dalits who have achieved a relative level of professional and material status in the modern Indian city" (Brueck 123).

Later, the narrator decides to move to Mumbai to complete a postgraduate degree. In order to pay for his studies, he accepts work in a massage parlor, tapping into the "lustful hatred" (Navaria 163) that the upper caste feels towards his own kind. He thereby shows complicity with a specifically colonial form of desire toward the racialized Other, which is characterized by "compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion" (Young, *Colonial Desire* 149). As the narrator himself understands, "the beauty they [my parents] had both endowed me with was ugliness, and that ugliness was both my beauty and my strength. Ugliness too is beauty; I had seen such a transformation. Differently beautiful" (Navaria 164). Navaria's counter-discursive elevation of the abject can be equated with Premchand's Social Realism, for whom the "displacement of the novelist's worldview from the elite to the peasant, the laborer, or the prostitute was part and parcel of a political program as well as an aesthetic strategy (to challenge traditional formalist notions of beauty and 'the beautiful art'..." (Gajarawala 6). The unnamed narrator occupies an "unclaimed terrain" (the title of the collection) in the interstices of meaning. This "Third Space" of hybridity à la Homi Bhabha is governed neither by one discourse (caste) nor another (race), nor still by the Christian precepts of his religious father. It dwells somewhere else, in-between a "rich untouchable" and a "poor brahmin" (Navaria 181).

Upon receiving his first paycheck, the narrator, to his astonishment, "understood that labor had many meanings in the city. The very thing that made [him] want to die back in the village was considered 'work' here. And one got paid for it. Here, labor had value. This opened up a new world" (Navaria 171). Can the largely destructive, destabilizing forces of global capital also prepare the ground for forms of collective resistance based on the newfound labor-value of Dalits? Evoking Dr. King's last speech to Memphis sanitation workers before his assassination, Ambedkar's address at the Annual meeting of the Bombay Municipal Worker's Union posits Dalit power by way of its articulation with the labor struggle: "You do not seem to realize the tremendous power you have in your hands. You can, simply by refusing to work, spread more havoc and disaster in a week than

Hindu-Muslim riots should do in three months” (Navaria 154). Gayatri Spivak’s reminder that, “of all the tools for developing alternative histories – gender, race, ethnicity, class – class is surely the most abstract” (58), nonetheless hints at a double bind. The abstracting qualities of class and its power to transcend particularisms make it difficult for social movements with a strong identitarian content to rally under its banner.

In “Hello Premchand,” Navaria conjures up the ghost of the father of Indian Social Realism in a bid to anchor his writing within a long tradition of both politically and historically committed Hindi literary authors whose “place must be with the people and their struggles for identity” (Navaria 194). By acknowledging the pivotal role played by non-Dalit Hindi authors such as Premchand in bringing forth the issue of caste, Navaria inscribes his oeuvre within the larger body of Hindi literature. By the same token, Navaria opposes a purist definition of Dalit literature based exclusively on the caste-ed origins of the writer or on the subject of untouchability (of which the burning of Premchand’s novel *Rangbhumi* in 2004 by Dalits remains to this day a telling expression). For Laura Brueck, “Navaria is one of the leading young writers on the Hindi Dalit literary scene, though to relegate his growing significance to the Dalit literary sphere alone belies the radical innovations his writings are introducing to Hindi literature in general” (123).

While showing indebtedness to Premchand’s legacy as an *engagé* writer, Navaria’s story is also a re-worked version of Premchand’s “The Price of Milk” (1934): “Dalit characters consigned to death or a hopeless existence [...] are resurrected, educated, and politicized in ‘Hello, Premchand!’” (Brueck 14). The protagonist of “Hello, Premchand!,” Mangal, is determined and able to continue his studies, following his mother’s last wish that her son ought never to “have to carry piss and shit” (Navaria 134). Part of Mangal’s success in rising above his caste results from his refusal to disclose his social status. Mangal accedes to a state of Being beyond the *proper*: viz. beyond the prerogatives of naming (*nom propre*) to the point of forgetting his origins, and beyond the strictures of property-wealth, allowing him to be removed from the worries of material comfort. Personal success is thus never far from the dangers of alienating oneself from one’s community, the collective suffering of an oppressed group inciting many to barter dreams of equality for upward mobility. The dichotomy between pre-class rural communalism and modern metropolitan individualism is felt sharply by Dalits like Mangal. In the following passage, the reader is exposed to what seems like an incommensurable gap:

.... Here is the village—our roots, our land. Where there is indignity, abuse, helplessness, and weakness. Every moment, the fear of dishonor. Every second, the feeling of being small... Here in the city, I am an executive in a big government enterprise. An officer. Mr Siddharth Nirmal, Marketing Manager. My wife works as a college lecturer. We have a house.... (Navaria 98-9)

Caste occupies a key position in Navaria's collection: it governs characters' fears, desires, and motives. Navaria's editor S. Anand explained in an interview how at the time of the creation of Navayana Press in 2003, "English-language editors had yet to consider caste as an issue. We understood that there was a void on these questions and that it had to become our main driving theme" (Lardinois 98). Although specific restraints arise from translating Dalit literatures into English, Navaria's language draws attention to the continuation of colonial psychic structures in a postcolonial, globalized and multilingual India. In the next section, I will explore how Goyu Shyamala's collection also resists the "anthropologization" of literary imagination through its multilayer circuits of cultural (un)translatability. In Sanskrit, Navayana means "new vehicle." For anti-caste struggle to effectively become a vehicle for change requires building transversal axes of solidarities across multiple languages, oppressed groups and analytical categories, as Ambedkar's Worker's Union speech implies. Here, I do not only think of the workers' movement but consider other strategic essentialisms as well, as does Anand when in his interview he lists few other existing Anglophone independent publishing houses in India, including *Kali for Women*.

Writing Dalit Femininity: Goyu Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*

A distinctive feature of Goyu Shyamala's collection is its female, even feminist, orientation, as its title, the gender of the author, and the fact that most of its semi-autobiographical stories are narrated either by, or from the perspective of, a woman or little girl suggest. In the afterword, however, K. Lalita guards the reader against reducing the text to "its feminist sensibility" (250), recalling in particular the opening story, in which the narrator's mother is beaten up by her husband. Lalita reports Shyamala's own words that "it was completely unintentional and she did not mean to show her father in poor light" (250). I will revert later to the Derridean "supplementarity" of those explanatory afterwords, also to be found in Navaria's collection, and to the task of translating postcolonial or indigenous literatures more generally. For now, it is worth dwelling on the gendered dynamic in the above-mentioned occurrence of domestic violence from Shyamala's opening story, for although certainly not limited to the issue of gender, the story serves to illustrate two ostensibly antithetical purposes of the Dalit feminist literary project: first, to raise the issue of women's sexual/physical abuse; secondly, to push forward unconventional scripts showing Dalit women not as victims, but as agents of social change, as dignified subjectivities and masters of their own destinies. As Laura Brueck reminds us, "automatic reliance on the abuse and stigmatization of women results from a *misogynist* perspective (based on reverence of the infamous classical text, the *Manusmṛiti*, that condemns both Dalits and women to abject existences)" (58).

In the staging of the narrator's mother's thrashing, Shyamala demonstrates (unconsciously or not) just how essential women's lives are to the functioning of south-western rural Telangana where the author grew up, despite, or rather because of, the mother being disparagingly compared to "cattle" (24). In Shyamala's miniature world, land and cattle are ultimately worth far more than their upper caste owners or than Dalit wage-laborers exploiting those resources. When her husband returns home both broke and broken from failing to make money in the city, it is his wife's sustenance that will save him. As the saying goes, "an elephant-like father may go, but the small basket-like mother should stay" (Shyamala 26). Far from acquiescing to the status quo and accepting a minimal image of women as bound to the domestic sphere, Shyamala's female characters explicitly reject, often contest, and sometimes succeed in partially disrupting the caste system and its neat stratification of beings and roles. As a review further stressed: "Shyamala also works her stories around issues that have been at the epicenter of the Telangana campaign: irrigation and water resources. Thus, Shyamala refuses to make the stories domestic, so escaping the usual trap laid for women writers" (Nayar).

Telangana, where the collection is set, is a relatively dry area and since 2009 has been the locus of a movement for a separate state over water resources, which Shyamala's story "The Village Tank's Lament" brings to mind. Telangana was subsequently formed as the 29th state of India in June 2014, and Shyamala herself actively took part in the struggle, supported by Naxalite revolutionary groups. Telangana has a long tradition of female self-assertion and militancy, stretching from the 1930s well into the aftermaths of Indian independence. Led by the Communists, the "Telangana People's Struggle" involved armed resistance of women and men to the Nizam (hereditary ruler)'s feudal oppression in the Telangana region of the princely state of Hyderabad. In her book *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle*, Stree Shakti Sanghatana adds that, "nowhere was the feudal exploitation of the peasantry more intense than in the Telangana districts of Hyderabad state" (5). *Vetti* (free services to the landlord) or forced labor chiefly befell the lower and untouchable castes of *malas* and *madigas*, as well as tribal groups such as the *chenchus*. At one point, untouchability was abolished, although the newly created Indian army eventually crushed the rebellion.

Telangana had been merged with the former Andhra State to form Andhra Pradesh as part of the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956, and safeguards were officially provided to protect Telanganites' interests. Yet not only were Telangana's natural resources (water, minerals) systematically diverted to other areas, Telanganites were also looked down upon as backward and their use of Telugu laughed at. Language accounts for a core part of Telangana's fight for self-determination. At the time of British colonialism, Hyderabad, whose eponymous capital is today located in Telangana, was the biggest of India's so-called princely states, and the Telugu-speaking Telanganites the biggest linguistic group in Hyderabad. Urdu remained the official

language, so that one needed to be versed in Urdu or even Persian to be educated/literate:

Even after Independence when Telugu was officially recognized and taught, the Telangana form of the language continued to be regarded as inferior or non-standard. One reason for this was that it had, over the course of time, incorporated many Urdu words and idioms, and its rhythms differed from the 'purer', 'classical' forms of the more Sanskritized Telugu of the other regions of Andhra. (Sanghatana 283)

Unlike Andhra Telugu, Telangana Telugu does not have a standard written form, and "only very recently have attempts been made, even in fiction, to use Telangana Telugu" (283). Shyamala's literary work consists of one such attempt. As specified in the notes on the translation at the end of the collection, her stories "are written in a variant of Telugu used by Dalits in the Tandur region of western Telangana" (Shyamala 245).

Shyamala's linguistic commitment and her participation in "various democratic movements such as the Marxist-Leninist movement, the women's movement and the dalit movement" (254-5), however, do not alone explain the seemingly more disputatious and unambiguous tonality of her idiom. Unlike Navaria's stories, which shift between city and country, Shyamala's collection takes place chiefly in a rural setting where the line between ruled and ruler may seem more flagrant, though no less pernicious. Shyamala's written account of her childhood memories registers a slowly disappearing pastoral life, albeit "without nostalgia." As we are told, "the rural world of western Telangana, like perhaps any other part of India, is also brutal to dalits" (253). Shyamala does not shy away from anti-caste rhetoric, at the risk of reifying what defines Dalit literary consciousness, so that literary critics may object to Shyamala's worldview being at times Manichean, promoting a somewhat idyllic portrait of Dalit *chetnā*.

In the following excerpt from a story entitled "A Beauteous Light," Balaiah, a *dakkali* leader belonging to the *madiga* community, employs the oratorical "you" form in order to capture the audience's attention, as well as an "us vs. them" logic, throwing into relief the existence of two parallel universes and ways of life:

You [Dalits] raise bullocks because you do agricultural work and turn the land into a productive asset. But there is no natural connection between the world in which they [Brahmans] live and the tilling of the land. That is why they never mention the bullocks or chant the name of the buffalo. While you keep saying 'Bullocks, agriculture and work,' they keep chanting 'The goddess cow, milk, yoghurt and food.' You have Ellamma, Poshamma and Mysamma but they cling to Vishnu and Parashuramulu. They know these *differences* and understand the implications. You should also deliberate in the light of these *differences*. (222; added emphasis)

Is Shyamala's viewpoint over-simplistic and totalizing? Or is the metropolitan (western) middle-class intellectual displaying self-indulgence by positing criticism above both the masses and the ruling elites, and in-between the many grey shades of cerebral sophistication?

Theoretical injunctions that power is capillary (Foucault), rhizomic (Deleuze), absence (Derrida) or simulacra (Baudrillard) may sound vain if not altogether cynical in the eyes of the subaltern, for whom the world irreducibly remains black-and-white. In the above excerpt, Balaiah raises Dalits' political consciousness by asserting the untranslatability of Dalit and Brahmin philosophies of life and by reversing negative perceptions about the intrinsic inferiority of Dalits. As Brueck puts it, "Dalit *chetnā* today is a thoroughly modern critical concept in the mode of deconstruction. It is an expression of denial, a theoretical tool that contributes to the destabilization of traditional notions of social hierarchies and cultural authenticity" (75-6).

"A Beauteous Light" features a Brahmin boy named Sharma. His community rejects him for disrupting "the political economy of caste hierarchy" (Shyamala 215) after Sharma saves a young *madiga* girl named Ellamma from drowning. For touching that which is untouchable, Sharma is isolated, along with his family, by the Brahmanic community: "It was an established practice to keep such families in a separate room in the agraaharam [Brahmin village quarter] if such pollution had taken place" (198). Eventually, Sharma will suffer outright banishment for falling in love with, and vowing to marry, Ellamma. Pace an insular conception of Dalitness (meaning "oppressed" in Marathi) grounded in an ontological discourse of origins, Shyamala invites us to consider Dalit identity as a broad church and sanctuary for the outcaste: "The madiga wada [area outside the village where untouchables live] harbored no fear of banishment as they had always lived in banishment. As a matter of fact, they took care of all who sought *shelter* after such banishments" (217; added emphasis). Derived from the English shield, from the French *abri*, itself derived from the Spanish *abrir*, to open, sheltering provides for both protection and openness, conservation and renewal, resistance and negotiation.

Sharma's and the *madiga* community's reciprocal outreach are reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's concluding words in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? [. . .] At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness" (qtd. in "Remembering Fanon" xx). In Shyamala's world, intimate knowledge of the nature and reality of brute force befalling Dalits and non-Dalits, as well as women, opens up a humanist consciousness surpassing differences. In this light, the Hindi term *Bahujan* (multitude) conceives of the Dalit movement as "an aggregate of lower-caste and religious minority communities representing 85 % of the population" (Jaoul 54). The term *Bahujan* moves us beyond the sole paradigm of caste while offering an alternative to the Marxist notion of the proletariat. The idea of the multitude also encourages inter-caste mixing, rendered difficult by village pressure to practice endogamy and by lack of opportunities. Toral Gajarawala seizes well the contradictory, ambivalent nature of Dalit literature when she argues how the latter "is poised between a regionalism that revels in local dialect and the nontransferable

specificity of caste conditioning, on the one hand, and a broad universalism that invokes a certain global paradigm of protest (both politically and culturally), on the other” (3).

This double articulation will help shed light on the political significance of Dalit literature, as expressed in the multiple estrangements triggered by translating Shyamala’s collection (from the Telugu variant, via an educated middle-class Andhra audience, to its English version as World Literature). These translational transactions do not so much lead to a draining of power as they follow the exilic trail of those millions displaced by India’s modernizing impulse, which involves both “gains” and “losses” (Shyamala 247). Echoing the “representational” character of political struggles (feminist, Marxian, anti-caste, ecological, etc.) is the problem of minority literature’s ability to *translate* this exilic reality. Such an act of displacement, or “transfer between contexts” (qtd. in Pai 77), is always-already belated, in that it will unavoidably differ from/defer a putative “origin.” This is in spite of, or rather owing to, those explanatory notes postfacing Dalit literary works in an attempt to “authenticate the text by conveying to readers that the translation – both linguistic and cultural – has been approved by the Dalit protagonist” (Pai 78). Indeed, the nontransferable originality of Shyamala’s dialect – its colloquialisms and idiosyncratic rhythms – ought to guard against reducing the latter to a pale copy: “The translators have looked past the educated Telugu reader’s estrangement, endorsed the author’s pleasure in the reclamation of her tongue, and accorded the Tandur [Telangana] variant the status and dignity of a full-fledged language” (Shyamala 246-7).

Shyamala’s collection raises other issues besides language. In “Raw Wound,” these include access to land, education and the role of religion in Dalit women’s lives. The story’s young child-narrator is destined to become a *jogini* or “God’s wife,” referring to “a lower caste woman who is declared as the (sexual) property of the whole village” (235). The status of *jogini* (also known as *erpula* or more generally as *devadasi*, an oppressive structure more commonly prevalent in the regions of Andhra, Karnataka, and Telangana) is sometimes regarded as a caste in its own right. This not only shows the specificity of women’s oppression but also brings out in the open the entanglement of caste, patriarchy, and religion in the making of India’s social fabric. The female narrator’s father Balappa’s harsh beating at the start of the story originates in his refusal to abide by the customary law of a system which “the government banned ... ages ago” (143). Balappa’s wish for his youngest daughter is to get an education, since his two older sons were forced into bonded labor, or which amounts to serfdom. Those harbingers of death wanting to make sure village law will prevail are well known, and Shyamala goes to great lengths to spell out the names of Balappa’s aggressors: “Balappa had thought that the landlord would be alone, but he saw him from afar, sitting with the sub-inspector of police, the ex-sarpanch Chandra Reddy, the moneylender Badrappa Setu, the village revenue accountant Karnam Srirama Sharma Pantulu” (147). Balappa’s desperate quest for an

education for his daughter eventually leaves him with no choice but to sacrifice his land and abandon his village.

Education is a habitual trope in Dalit narratives. Shyamala's story "Obstacle Race" is centered on a little boy named Adivi and his parents' dream to give their son schooling. Apart from having to cope with relentless discrimination at school, Adivi must also deal with an internal moral conflict of his own. Adivi needs to choose either his educational pursuits or helping his mother back in the village with "picking up the dung at the dora's [landlord's] house" and "tak[ing] the calves to graze" (119) with his father. Although not the only root cause explaining inequality and social reproduction in India, illiteracy remains a major hurdle. It prevents Dalits from gaining political and critical consciousness, maintaining the latter in a state of ignorance, fear and submission vis-à-vis Brahmanic Hindus (as Brahmins are themselves only too aware of): "Teaching that boy to read and write indeed! That fellow is a crafty rascal without an education. He is a baindla boy. The baindla... [priests of the untouchable castes] they are into all kinds of worship and even witchcraft! Imagine what they will do once they are educated. They're going to take over our temples!" (128). Religion, like education, is a double-edged sword. It can either be a vector of social control or a source of spiritual/intellectual nourishment, depending on its being designed as a pedagogical tool of the oppressed or contrived as a self-serving instrument of/for the elites.

To conclude, I will come back to the question of female power in Dalit literature, and to the subject of artistic representation. "Jambava's Lineage," another story in the collection, is concerned with the *chindu* community. The *chindus* belong to the *madiga* castes and function as storytellers by doing stage performances of the epics and folkloric tales of various castes. The *madigas'* celebration of the *Jambavapuramam* in particular "explains the various aspects of the pre-creation, creation and evolution of this Universe" (119). It contrasts with the Brahmanic Hindu foundational myth of the Ramayana, which "separates humanity into different castes and communities in political and social isolation from each other, [whereas] the Jambavapuramam is about the association of different caste groups" (237). The performative nature of *chindu* identity allows the latter to inhabit a variety of subject positionings and transgress taboos. The main protagonist of "Jambava's Lineage," Ellamma, bears the name of a much-revered deity amongst the *madigas*. As Ellamma tells her children: "When I played the male and female roles with equal ease, they [the audience] marveled even more" (83). Shyamala, via Ellamma, is also critical of the philistine character of upper caste art, which has "turned all art into commerce" (79). By instead reminding her children how the *chindu* community performs "for the sake of the sabbanda [Backward Classes (BCs)] community, not just for their money" (79), Ellamma-Shyamala approaches Art as a sublimated extension of life.

Conclusion

To define Dalit literature as a “document of both pain and struggle” (Hunt 212) is to overlook the internal aesthetic dynamics of Dalit texts (Brueck). Yet it also offers the possibility of reaching beyond the local Dalit polity through a comparative study with other subaltern literatures across the languages of the postcolonial world. Its academic institutionalization as a result of years of bitter struggle for recognition means Dalit literature now faces the real risk of (self-) containment in its “desire to contribute to public imaginations of Indian society and the nation [...] while also attempting to join middle-class Indian society on equal terms” (Hunt 210). In other words, Dalit literature must be able to carve out its own space with respect to dominant forms of aesthetic and artistic expression in India while eluding the pitfalls of identity politics and of “difference-for-difference’s-sake.” *Navayana* editor S. Anand is himself aware of the financial risks and precariousness involved in charting novel, “unclaimed terrain,” and in developing “editorial niches” that may turn into “ghettoes” or vanish altogether – so diffuse and multifarious are the forms and types of social movements in India.

My aim in selecting for this article two collections that differ in many aspects was precisely to confront the manifold histories existing within the Dalit literary sphere beyond the Dalit/non-Dalit dichotomy. In Brueck’s words: “A simplistic interpretation of the “difference” of Dalit writing from more mainstream or elite categories of literature is not at all reflective of the nuanced, complex, and diverse *literary* reality of contemporary Dalit writing in India” (8). This is not to say that Dalit literature ought to escape from the “tyranny” of difference or from culturally or politically oriented content, with all due respect to certain parts of the Indian literary establishment who may deem Dalit *chetnā* as a second-rate art form. I would argue how it is through content – that is, through a dissenting content that both *contends*, and cannot be *content*, with the dominant discourse – that form arises. Dalit literary consciousness draws its force from the concrete labor of the multitude or *Bahujan*, rather than from an abstracted art-for-art’s-sake ideal, emphasizing use-value over commodity-exchange in its operation as a prime vehicle for self-determination.

Through the employment of a series of innovative linguistic, structural and representational twists, Ajay Navaria’s stories about the urban Dalit middle-class male lay bare, amongst other things, how “caste-based discrimination cannot be avoided even in cities such as Delhi, despite the possibility of temporary anonymity [...] where, for example, colleagues persistently ask revealing questions until the caste identity of their fellow workmate is exposed” (Hunt 10). As for Goyu Shyamala, currently a senior fellow at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women in Hyderabad, her self-evident feminist, anti-caste militancy adds a layer of understanding about the specific form that World Literature may incarnate in the future, when “re-conceived not as an accumulation of certain texts for profit but as a social relation among producers scattered all over the globe, in their specific locales, but

connected to each other in relations of radical equality” (Ahmad 29). Indeed, could we not see Shyamala’s story-fragments, written in a “minor” mode, as part of a larger fresco corresponding to the desire, shared by other Dalit writers, for the delineation of a holistic worldview from below, and beyond linguistico-ethnic differences? Reading Shyamala’s short story “Trace It!” about an old *madiga* village woman’s funeral, I came across the following lines: “The men born from her womb, and those born alongside her, wept like women” (Shyamala 31). It reminded me of what Guyanese writer Wilson Harris metaphorically called the “womb of space,” designed “to transform claustrophobic ritual by cross-cultural imaginations” (xv). Once a tool of communication from the rulers to the ruled (Shyamala 239), the hypnotic beat of the dappu drum heard at the funeral (*jadabuk-tak jadabuk-tak*) has been reappropriated to now work as an organ of cultural translation/transmission, resonating across successive generations of *madiga* families (both old and young) and farther still, across the Indian Subcontinent.

Notes

1. The reservation policy comprises a set of measures by the Indian government to “ensure proportional participation of the SCs in various public spheres, which would not otherwise have been possible because of the prevalence of exclusion and discrimination. However [...] the SC workforce in the private sector, which employs more than 90 per cent of the SC workers, remains unprotected from possible exclusion and discrimination” (Thorat 5).

2. Formerly Depressed Castes, SCs refer to a list set out by the Indian government. Its main selection criterion was based on the alleged “backwardness” of a given caste (Thorat 2), as part of the Brahminic, patronizing institutionalized affirmative action of Nehruvian socialism.

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