

Caste as an Internal Border in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

The caste system has been one of the most influential social structures in Indian society for centuries. It organizes society into hierarchical groups based on birth, occupation, and notions of purity and pollution. While national borders divide countries geographically, caste functions as an internal border that separates communities within the same nation. These invisible social boundaries regulate access to resources, opportunities, and social relationships. Indian English literature has played a crucial role in exposing the realities of caste discrimination and highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits.

This research paper examines the concept of caste as an internal border in Indian English literature. It explores how literary works represent the social, cultural, and psychological barriers created by caste hierarchy. Through the study of Dalit narratives, autobiographies, and contemporary Indian English texts, the paper analyzes how literature reveals the lived experiences of exclusion, oppression, and resistance among marginalized communities.

The study demonstrates that caste operates as a powerful internal border that restricts mobility, social interaction, and identity formation. Writers portray caste not only as a system of discrimination but also as a mechanism that shapes power relations and social identities. At the same time, literature becomes a site of resistance where marginalized voices challenge oppressive structures and assert dignity and equality.

By examining literary representations of caste, the research highlights the importance of literature in raising awareness about social injustice and promoting social change. Indian English literature thus serves as a critical space for interrogating caste hierarchy and imagining a more egalitarian society.

Keywords: Caste system, internal border, Dalit literature, Indian English literature, social hierarchy, identity, marginalization etc.

Introduction

The caste system has historically structured Indian society into rigid hierarchical groups determined by birth and occupation. Although modern India is constitutionally committed to equality, caste continues to influence social interactions, economic opportunities, and cultural identities. The concept of caste can be understood as a form of internal border that divides society into separate communities and limits interaction between them.

Unlike geographical borders that separate nations, caste boundaries exist within communities and everyday social life. These invisible borders determine where people live, whom they interact with, and what occupations they can pursue. Historically, Dalits—formerly referred to as “untouchables”—have been placed at the lowest level of this hierarchy and subjected to discrimination and exclusion.

Indian literature has long reflected these social realities. Writers have used literary narratives to portray the experiences of marginalized communities and to critique the injustices embedded in caste hierarchy. Dalit literature emerged as a powerful literary movement dedicated to representing the voices of oppressed communities and challenging social inequality. This body of literature focuses on the struggles and lived experiences of Dalits in relation to caste discrimination and social exclusion.

Indian English literature has increasingly incorporated themes related to caste identity, marginalization, and resistance. Through novels, autobiographies, and memoirs, writers highlight the ways in which caste functions as a boundary that restricts mobility and social participation. These literary texts reveal that caste discrimination persists even in modern and urban contexts.

The metaphor of caste as an internal border provides a useful framework for understanding the complex relationship between social hierarchy and identity. Just as national borders regulate movement and belonging, caste boundaries regulate access to social spaces and opportunities. Literature therefore becomes an important medium for examining how these boundaries operate and how they can be challenged.

Review of Literature

Scholars of Indian literature have extensively examined the representation of caste and marginalization in literary texts. Many studies emphasize that literature serves as a powerful tool for exposing social inequalities and amplifying marginalized voices.

Research on Dalit literature highlights its role in challenging traditional literary narratives that often ignored or misrepresented the experiences of oppressed communities. Dalit writers focus on personal and collective experiences of discrimination, social exclusion, and resistance. These narratives aim to dismantle the cultural silence surrounding caste oppression.

Several autobiographical works illustrate how caste functions as an internal border in everyday life. For example, the memoir *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* by Sujatha Gidla explores the struggles of a Dalit family navigating social and economic discrimination in modern India. The book demonstrates how caste hierarchy continues to shape opportunities and social relations even in contemporary society.

Similarly, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System* by Yashica Dutt describes the experience of concealing Dalit identity to avoid discrimination. The memoir reveals how caste boundaries operate psychologically as well as socially, forcing individuals to hide their identity to access opportunities.

Another significant work is *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* by Manoranjan Byapari, which narrates the struggles of a Dalit individual growing up in post-partition India and confronting social exclusion.

Scholars also highlight the intersection of caste with gender and class in literary narratives. Studies show that Dalit women often face multiple forms of oppression due to the combined effects of caste and patriarchy. Research on Dalit feminist writing emphasizes how literature exposes these intersecting forms of discrimination.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates that Indian English texts play an important role in representing caste as a powerful internal boundary that shapes social identity and inequality.

Research Tools

This research adopts a qualitative approach to analyze the representation of caste in Indian English literature. The study relies primarily on textual analysis of literary works and critical scholarship related to caste and Dalit literature. The research tools used include:

1. **Textual Analysis** – Close reading of literary texts that depict caste discrimination and marginalization.
2. **Feminist and Dalit Theoretical Frameworks** – Understanding caste through perspectives of social justice and equality.
3. **Sociological Analysis** – Examining how caste functions as a system of social hierarchy and exclusion.
4. **Comparative Literary Study** – Comparing representations of caste across different literary genres such as novels, memoirs, and autobiographies.

These research tools help in understanding how literature reflects and critiques social realities associated with caste.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the representation of caste as an internal border in Indian English literature.
2. To explore how literary narratives portray social exclusion and discrimination based on caste.
3. To examine the experiences of marginalized communities represented in Dalit literature.
4. To study how literature challenges caste hierarchy and promotes social awareness.
5. To highlight the role of literature in advocating equality and social justice.

Subject Matter

Caste as a Social Boundary

Caste functions as a rigid and deeply embedded social boundary in Indian society, shaping an individual's identity, occupation, and social status from birth. Unlike economic class, which may change through education or wealth, caste traditionally remains fixed throughout a person's life. This rigid structure creates invisible yet powerful divisions within society, separating communities into hierarchical groups and regulating how individuals interact with one another. As a result, caste operates much like an internal border that determines where people belong and how they are perceived within the social order.

The caste system divided society into several hierarchical categories, with the upper castes enjoying greater privileges and authority, while lower castes, particularly Dalits, faced discrimination and exclusion. These boundaries influence many aspects of everyday life, including access to education, employment opportunities, housing, and social relationships. For instance, people from different caste groups were often discouraged or even prohibited from sharing food, living in the same neighbourhoods, or forming close social relationships.

In literary works such as *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, caste boundaries are portrayed as powerful forces that restrict mobility and human relationships. Characters belonging to marginalized castes are often confined to specific occupations and social spaces, reflecting the harsh realities of caste hierarchy. Through these narratives, literature exposes how caste continues to function as a social boundary that limits freedom, reinforces inequality, and shapes individual destinies.

Marginalization and Social Exclusion

Marginalization and social exclusion have been central experiences for Dalits within the caste-based hierarchy of Indian society. Historically, Dalits were placed at the lowest level of the social order and were often

treated as “untouchables,” which resulted in systematic discrimination and deprivation. This exclusion affected almost every aspect of life, including access to education, employment, public spaces, and cultural participation. As a result, caste functioned as a powerful mechanism that separated Dalits from mainstream society and denied them equal opportunities.

In many traditional communities, Dalits were not allowed to enter temples, draw water from common wells, or live in the same neighbourhoods as members of higher castes. These restrictions reinforced the idea that Dalits were socially inferior and should remain outside the dominant social structure. Even in modern times, the legacy of these practices continues to influence social attitudes and institutional structures.

Indian English literature has played an important role in portraying these realities and exposing the injustice of caste discrimination. Literary works often depict how Dalit characters struggle to gain access to education, employment, and social recognition. For example, novels such as *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand vividly portray the humiliation and exclusion faced by a young Dalit man in his everyday life. Similarly, Dalit autobiographical writings reveal how caste discrimination continues to shape personal experiences and social relationships.

Through these narratives, literature highlights the deep psychological and social impact of marginalization. The constant experience of exclusion can create feelings of humiliation, anger, and resistance among marginalized individuals. At the same time, these literary works also emphasize the struggle for dignity, equality, and social justice, encouraging readers to reflect on the persistence of caste inequality in contemporary society.

Identity and Psychological Borders

Caste does not only function as a social or institutional boundary; it also operates as a powerful psychological border that shapes an individual's sense of identity and self-perception. From an early age, individuals in caste-based societies become aware of their social position through everyday interactions, social expectations, and cultural practices. For Dalits and other marginalized communities, this awareness often leads to a deep internalization of social stigma and discrimination. As a result, caste influences not only how individuals are treated by others but also how they perceive themselves and their place within society.

Many Dalit narratives in Indian English literature vividly portray the emotional and psychological consequences of caste discrimination. Experiences such as humiliation, rejection, and exclusion can create feelings of insecurity, anger, and alienation. In several autobiographical and fictional works, Dalit characters describe how they struggle with questions of identity while navigating a society that constantly reminds them of their supposed inferiority.

For instance, in *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System* by Yashica Dutt, the author reflects on the pressure to conceal her caste identity in order to avoid discrimination in educational and professional spaces. Such narratives reveal how caste boundaries can operate internally, shaping thoughts, emotions, and personal aspirations.

Through these portrayals, literature highlights the profound psychological impact of caste hierarchy. At the same time, many Dalit writers use storytelling as a form of empowerment, reclaiming their identities and challenging the psychological borders imposed by society.

Resistance and Assertion of Identity

Dalit literature plays a crucial role in portraying resistance against caste oppression and asserting the dignity and humanity of marginalized communities. For centuries, dominant literary traditions often ignored or misrepresented the experiences of Dalits. In response to this exclusion, Dalit writers began to create their own literary voices that directly challenge the social and cultural structures sustaining caste hierarchy. Through poetry, autobiographies, short stories, and novels, Dalit literature exposes the harsh realities of discrimination while simultaneously affirming the strength and resilience of oppressed communities.

One of the central themes in Dalit writing is the assertion of identity. Instead of accepting the stigmatized identities imposed by caste society, Dalit authors reclaim their history, culture, and experiences. This act of storytelling becomes a form of resistance, as it allows marginalized individuals to speak for themselves and question the authority of dominant social narratives. The works of writers such as Omprakash Valmiki and Bama vividly depict everyday struggles against caste discrimination while emphasizing self-respect and social dignity.

Dalit literature also reflects the influence of the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar, whose philosophy of equality and social justice inspired many writers and activists. By presenting stories of resistance, education, and empowerment, Dalit literature encourages readers to challenge caste prejudice and imagine a more just and inclusive society where human dignity is recognized regardless of caste identity.

Literature as Social Critique

Indian English literature has emerged as a powerful platform for critiquing caste hierarchy and exposing the deep-rooted social injustices present in Indian society. Through novels, short stories, autobiographies, and essays, writers have used literature as a medium to question the oppressive structures that sustain caste discrimination. By portraying the lived experiences of marginalized communities, literature brings attention to the inequalities and hardships faced by individuals belonging to lower caste groups.

Many Indian English writers have addressed caste issues in their works, highlighting how caste-based prejudice affects everyday life, relationships, and opportunities. Literary texts often depict the struggles of marginalized individuals who face humiliation, exclusion, and discrimination in various social institutions such as schools, workplaces, and public spaces. For example, novels like *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand reveal the harsh realities of untouchability and the humiliation experienced by Dalits in a caste-based society. Similarly, *The God of*

Small Things by Arundhati Roy explores how rigid social hierarchies control relationships and punish those who attempt to cross caste boundaries.

Through such narratives, literature acts as a form of social critique by exposing the contradictions between the ideals of equality and the realities of caste discrimination. Writers challenge readers to reflect on the persistence of social inequality and to question the legitimacy of caste hierarchy. By giving voice to marginalized communities, Indian English literature contributes to a broader discourse on social justice, human dignity, and the need for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Findings of the Study

The study reveals several significant findings:

1. Caste functions as a powerful internal border that shapes social relations and identity in India.
2. Indian English literature effectively exposes the realities of caste discrimination and marginalization.
3. Dalit autobiographies and narratives highlight the psychological and social impact of caste hierarchy.
4. Literature serves as an important tool for resistance and empowerment among marginalized communities.
5. The representation of caste in literature encourages readers to question social inequalities and support social reform.

Conclusion

The concept of caste as an internal border provides a meaningful framework for understanding social inequality in India. Unlike geographical borders, caste boundaries operate within society and shape everyday interactions. These invisible boundaries restrict mobility, reinforce social hierarchy, and perpetuate discrimination against marginalized communities.

Indian English literature plays a crucial role in revealing the realities of caste oppression. Through novels, memoirs, and autobiographies, writers portray the lived experiences of Dalits and other marginalized groups. These narratives expose the injustices embedded in the caste system and challenge dominant social norms.

At the same time, literature serves as a powerful space for resistance and transformation. Dalit writers and activists use storytelling to reclaim their voices and assert their identities. By bringing marginalized perspectives into mainstream literary discourse, Indian English literature contributes to broader social awareness and dialogue about caste discrimination.

The study demonstrates that literature can serve as a catalyst for social change. By exposing the internal borders created by caste, literary works encourage readers to question hierarchical structures and imagine a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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