

Beyond 'Sob Stories': Dalit Women's Testimonios as a Feminist Epistemological Challenge to Brahmanical Sociology

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Abstract

The paper is a critical engagement with the epistemological challenge posed by dalit women's life narratives as theorized in Sharmila Rege's work. It maintains that these testimonies are not merely descriptions of pain but form a particular genre that subverts the normative, caste-unmarked models of Indian sociology and feminism. Drawing on the debates around the consumption of dalit literature, the paper demonstrates how dalit women's testimonios function as counter-narratives that resist the "official forgetting" of caste oppression, contest bourgeois autobiography, and advocate for a relational understanding of caste and gender. An epistemology of non-Brahmanical transformation.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Testimonio, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Feminist Epistemology, Caste, Gender, Standpoint Theory, Indian Sociology, Anti-Caste Movements, Autobiography

Introduction

The dominant sociological frameworks which have portrayed caste as a consensual and ritualistic system of caste have intentionally neglected to include caste. According to Sharmila Rege, this is an "'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles, resistance". This paper critically engages with the epistemological challenge posed by Dalit women's life narratives (or "testimonios") as theorized in Rege's seminal *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*. It challenges these "sob stories" not to be just pain and suffering but a very special one, that poses questions to the normatively feministic caste-less Indian sociology and feminism prevailing in the country.

A Collective Challenge to Bourgeois Autobiography is the title of the book. It's called A Collective Challenge to Bourgeois Autobiography

The Dalit life narratives question the bourgeois genre of autobiography, based on the supremacy of the individual "I". Rege views these stories as "testimonios" or acts of bearing witness, that "forg[e] a right to speak both for and beyond the individual" (Rege 13). The literary character of a testimonio is not its main purpose, but rather to "communicate the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle" (Rege 13). This is the disruption of the convention of 'autobiography' in which the 'I' is the less-egoistic subject and is replaced by the 'collectivity of the dalit community' (Rege 13). Thus, as Rege points out, "dalit life narratives have created a genre of testimonies, wherein the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode" (Rege 14). The testimonies expose the communitarian control of the self, which can be said to have even more significance for Dalit women, because in their speeches, the women expose concerns of gender that oppose the monadic, male-dominated communitarian idea of the Dalit community (Rege 14).

Facing the politics and the silence of knowledge.

The use of dalit testimony in academic writing is an active challenge to the "silence and misrepresentation of dalits" (Rege 13) which has infused institutionalised scholarship. According to Rege, the "brahmanical view" outlined in the "canonical knowledge of caste" (14) which is the official knowledge of caste in the country is "experientially insensitive to caste-based oppression" (14-15). This scholarship has resulted in a dangerous dualism between the "theoretical brahmins" and the "empirical shudras" (Rege 2) and in the formation of knowledge systems which are not linked to social realities. Caste, however, is brought into the lives of Dalit women in the testimonios, and is made to be "subversive chemicals" (Rege 15) instead of "pathological". They serve two purposes: they bring into the fore a feeling of 'Dalit triumphalism' and they make the 'upper caste' feel guilty for the social sins of their forebears (Rege 15).

A Dalit Feminist Standpoint Critique of Brahmanical Feminism.

Rege takes this concept of Dalit feminist standpoint further to say that it is a "more objective and emancipatory feminist position" (Rege 73). Unlike the theory and practice of the 'unmarked feminism' of the 1970s, the so-called 'dalit feminist standpoint' acknowledges that "the experience of oppression and resistance" of dalit women "are significant" in the development of a feminist standpoint in opposition to an unjust order as Rege elaborates (74). It puts the focus not on the non-specific category of "women" but "dalit women who have an interest in overthrowing the system and not rising within it" (Rege 67). At this juncture, it is evident that upper caste women are not capable of critically analysing their own situation of advantage. Rege says that the "invisible" nature of "structural and individual dimensions of caste" can happen from the privileged position (Rege 74). She critiques the additive approach to oppression simply adding caste to gender which assumes that "gender can be isolated from caste" and that there is a common oppression that unites all women (Rege 74). Thus, the non-Dalit women become the typical target of feminism while the 'difference' of Dalit women is in their non-woman aspect. This is a challenge for the belief that "caste identities could be transcended by the larger identity of sisterhood among all women" (Rege 2).

Pedagogy implications towards a Tritiya Ratna

The book represents a pedagogical project in the first place. Rege thinks the use of Dalit testimonies should not be 'sprinkling a little bit of dalit women's issues/problems' in the courses, it should be questioning the philosophy and structure of the courses. She is inspired by the Phule-Ambedkarite notion of education as a 'third eye' over which a questioning can occur of "misrecognition of the social world perpetuated by the dominant" (Rege 67). Perspectives of Dalit feminists can change pedagogies, as can women's studies, which can be a tritiya ratna (third jewel), as Rege says (67). This needs to transcend the concept of "feminist as tourist" and "feminist as explorer" which either places Dalit women within an existing structure, or assumes they are a different and equal culture altogether. Rather, it is a matter of an "oppositional pedagogy," which is a product of "complex relational understanding of social location, experience and history" (Rege 72).

Conclusion

Sharmila Rege's movie is a firm assertion of the liberating voice of Dalit women. She theorizes their testimonios as an epistemological challenge rather than as a story of woe, thus revealing the Brahmanical basis of gender and mainstream sociology. The narratives of Dalit women are not just stories but instruments of knowledge production which from the margins provide a multi-faceted, objective picture of the different forms of caste and gender oppression. They call for a change in the orientation of the academy to a "just and democratic" process of knowledge, that according to Rege, can be a "tritiya ratna" in the process of social transformation

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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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