

Unearthing the Space of Interpellation and Dalit Identity: Interrogating Power Dynamics in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* —A Discourse Analysis



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Abstract

The detrimental politics of canonical discourse, the paper argues, degrades the existence of certain sections of the communities and excludes them from the equation of power relations by delimiting their access to society's productive resources. Disciplinary power, in the guise of "morality", acts as a tool of "colonise", prescribes acceptable gestures and required behaviour, and through constant surveillance normalises a dominant "top-down" (dis)order. Moreover, it reduces Dalit women's existence into an amorphous property, readily mutilated and moulded under the whims of a phallogocentric order. Discursive practices further constitute body politics, making the female body an object of the active site of political struggle.

The researcher seeks to harbour how notions of injustice, power abuse, and domination are constructed and reflected in dominant narratives/Indian collective consciousness. To apply the analytic and descriptive methods to the present study, the primary source, i.e., the concerned text of the select writer as well as the secondary sources authored by Michel Foucault available in the form of criticism have been used. But, most importantly, several critics' scholarship studied the terms "Dalit" and "Caste" and found a locus of contention not only between West and East (Colonizer and Colonized) but also between the "colonized" themselves within the complex field of postcolonial studies, and that by no means a stable category. In other words, the concerns of the 'Dalit' are not necessarily similar to those of all remaining humans.

Therefore, the select texts I will be discussing may or may not completely 'fit' very neatly into the above-mentioned secondary theoretical texts; rather, they also provocatively draw from the following theoretical and disciplinary wells to fully address the "untouchables" and their concerns: Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2002), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2008), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989) by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid.

The present paper, hence, studies *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) as a literary exemplar to demonstrate how "disciplinary" power, as underscored by Foucault's discourse analysis, intervenes and determines the life of the Dalit community. Additionally, it not only lays bare the covert body politics of patriarchy with the unfiltered depiction of women's exploitation and atrocities but also represents a paradigm shift by advocating ways of emancipation for marginalised communities in general and Dalit communities in particular.

Keywords: Colonize, Discourse, Identity, Interpellation, Postcolonial, Power

Introduction

Recognizing as indispensable, the foremost element lies in acknowledging not just the canons of traditional Indian literary canon— 'the established and often privileged set of works' but also a distinct reality that they unequivocally align with the notion of "power." Without a shadow of a doubt, it is explicit that "canonical" literature being entrenched in traditional perspectives, upholds caste ideologies and has continued to overlook the narratives of the Dalits and other marginalized. In the words of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, "The literature of the Hindus is full of caste genealogies in which an attempt is made to give a noble origin to one caste and an ignoble origin to other castes" (*Annihilation of Caste* 47).

The proponents aligned with Ambedkarite principles have significantly enriched the ongoing discourse and initiatives by engaging with caste-based discrimination through literature, activism, legal avenues, and affirmative action aimed at fostering a more equitable and harmonious social fabric in India. Their commitment stands out as they often struggle to fully comprehend and articulately convey the authentic lived experiences of Dalits actively striving for equality and justice particularly when contrasted with mainstream critics or writers.

Dalit writers vocalized how, for centuries, conventional aesthetic norms have been utilized to assess and applaud mainstream literature. Dalit

critics contend that “literary standards” are inherently tailored to accommodate and validate the socio-economic perspectives of the dominant class. Given that Dalit literature emerges from the vastly distinct socio-economic realities of marginalized communities, it unequivocally demands a unique aesthetic framework tailored to complement and validate its literary expressions. As Marathi language poet, writer, and literary critic, Sharankumar Limbale, articulates:

To assert that someone’s writing will be called literature only when ‘our’ literary standards can be imposed on. It is a sign of cultural dictatorship. The yardsticks of literature do not remain standstill for all time. With changing times, literature changes, and there remains the possibility of change in its criticism too. New literary trends cannot be evaluated with traditional literary yardsticks. (Limbale 07)

The narratives produced by mainstream critics or writers are criticized for perpetuating the dominance of Hindu reformist ideologies, thereby contributing to the preservation of a hegemonic discourse that may not authentically represent the multifaceted struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community. In his seminal text, *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003), Omprakash Valmiki categorically accentuates,

They have responded to Dalit writers’ stark portrayals of caste discrimination with a sense of disbelief and accusations of exaggeration. They have claimed that caste is no longer relevant, either because it has already disappeared or because it is in the process of disappearing. In their view, therefore, Dalit writers are writing about old news. These critics and reviewers have also declared Dalit writings to be lacking in literary merit. (xx)

Reading and understanding Foucault’s Power-Knowledge framework gave the present study the critical tool to reflect on, and understand the process through which we come to know what it means to be at the periphery. It provides a valuable lens through which we can understand the historical shaping of the Dalit community and their experiences. Framing Dalit writers’ portrayals as “old news,” “no longer relevant,” “disappeared,” and “in the process of disappearing,” may align with Foucault’s concept of normalization. By downplaying the significance of caste issues, several “canonical” critics contribute to shaping societal norms and expectations. Such normalization is a form of power that dictates what is considered acceptable or irrelevant within the broader discourse. If these standards favour certain perspectives and marginalize others, it can result in biased assessments of literary merit.

Understanding the pivotal role of power in shaping knowledge and cultural value is crucial, illuminating

how literary institutions frequently function as discursive arenas. Within these spaces, specific narratives and voices are granted privilege, while others face marginalization. This comprehension provides advanced insights into the dynamics of cultural and literary discourse. Gatekeepers, who can include critics, editors, publishers, and other influential figures within the literary world, play a crucial role in determining which works gain recognition and validation. If the “gatekeepers” within literary institutions hold biased views about what constitutes “worthy” literature, works from marginalized groups, such as Dalit literature, may face exclusion or be unfairly deemed lacking in literary merit.

The interdependence of power and knowledge reveals how knowledge is a form of power and is intricately woven into social structures. With the analysis of Foucault’s framework particularly, through his work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the assumed universality of Enlightenment ideas not only questioned but revealed that the categories of thought are not timeless or universal but, rather, contingent upon historical and social contexts. In other words, Foucault argued that categories of thought, such as knowledge, truth, and reason, are not neutral, fixed, or inherent in human nature. Instead, they are shaped by historical, cultural, and societal factors and, hence, are embedded in power structures. Therefore, Foucault, in his seminal text, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) says:

We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset; we must oust those forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man with that of another; they must be driven out from the darkness in which they reign. And instead of according them unqualified, spontaneous value, we must accept, in the name of methodological rigour, that, in the first instance, they concern only a population of dispersed events. (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 22)

The historical experiences of the Dalit community in India have indeed been jeopardized by systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and oppression. The dominant caste groups have controlled knowledge production and dissemination. This control has been a means of reinforcing social hierarchies and perpetuating discrimination. Dominant castes in India perform as “bio-power” houses that “regulate” and control populations and knowledge through institutions. In Omprakash Valmiki’s case, the school and its institutional practices become tools of bio-power, enforcing exclusionary practices that maintain social norms.

He writes, "I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions, I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, such as rehearsals for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door." (*Joothan* 16)"

Here, instead of having/conveying merely a sympathetic perspective entrenched in the mainstream discourse and suggesting that they are rooted in static axes of oppression the discourse of oppression should move beyond the realm of everyday comprehension. The criticism by the current scholarly frameworks may oversimplify the understanding of Dalit issues by focusing primarily on the idea of oppression without considering the dynamic changes over time that should be focused on advancing or catalyzing the empowerment of the Dalit discourse. It is recognized that a discerning evaluation of present-day methodologies is imperative for the scholarly scrutiny of Dalit issues within the realm of academic research. Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, encompassing the intricate interplay of discourse and power, proves instrumental in elucidating the mechanisms through which the derogatory narrative, asserting "to be lacking in literary merit" among Dalits, functions within the intricate tapestry of societal structures. Through discursive practices, certain narratives, ideologies, and knowledge systems are privileged, while others may be marginalized or silenced. How individuals are hailed or called into specific subject positions by dominant discourses is indispensable to unfold.

The concerned study also delves into the caste as a mechanism, examining its profound implications for Indian society, and scrutinizes the lasting impact of a system that inherently prioritizes lineage over personal achievement. The overarching point is that "The centuries-old inferiority complex affected a segment of the Dalits, and this compelled them to hide their identity as Dalits. They kept their distance from other Dalits to win favour from the savarnas, and they worked against Dalits, reporting on their activities to savarnas" (*Joothan* 126). These behaviours—internalization of inferiority, distancing, and collaboration—are not random but are influenced by the established societal norms and power structures inherent in a caste-based social order which is characterized by a hierarchical structure "produced Chaturvarna, the system of society that historically categorizes all castes according to four major divisions, which were arranged hierarchically in a descending order of "purity." (*Joothan* xxii) that further assigns different roles and values to individuals based on their caste, perpetuating social inequality. Such as, as Valmiki

writes, "at the top of this power structure were the Brahmins, who were performers of rituals and keepers of sacred texts (the Vedas, the Smritis, and the Puranas), and the Kshatriyas, who, as rulers and warriors, patronized the Brahmins and commissioned the rituals, including the yagna, or fire ritual of animal sacrifices and gifts to Brahmins" (*Joothan* xxii). The Brahmins and Kshatriyas were constantly feuding for control of power, these two varnas considered themselves superior to the Vaisyas—the cultivators and traders—and. Whereas, Sudras, "the servants and performers of menial tasks," were denied the ritual of upanayana, the sacred thread ceremony, by the Brahmins, in alliance with the king or state, which gave the three varnas above them the status of *dwija*, or twice born.

The caste system's deeply embedded hierarchies and social divisions have significantly shaped Indian society through the ages. At the heart of this intricate societal framework lies two major concepts: At the heart of caste-based exploitation is economic exclusion. The denial of access to material resources to the lower castes such as land ownership, access to education, employment opportunities, and even the right to use communal resources are freely available to higher castes. Such economic and social exclusion reinforces the socioeconomic hierarchies and dependencies that have characterized Indian society for centuries. The appropriation of surplus, or economic output beyond the subsistence needs of the labouring class, is almost invariably drawn from the Dalits, who are often relegated to the most menial and poorly paid occupations. Beyond economic exploitation, caste ideology inflicts a more insidious form of violence on Dalits by denying them dignity and personhood. The ramifications of denial and exclusion find poignant expression in the words of Omprakash Valmiki, who articulates the silent endurance of myriad hardships within the village. In his evocative narrative, "most people in our village *basti* suffered everything in silence. Honour and prestige had no meaning for them. Being threatened and controlled by the higher-ups was an everyday occurrence for the *basti* dwellers" (22).

Hence, the ascending scale of reverence has become a pivotal principle that meticulously apportions higher social regard and privileges to specific castes, thereby instituting a rigid hierarchy based on birthright rather than individual merit, as Uma Chakravarti in her seminal text, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) mentions Ambedkar's formulation of a striking analysis of the caste system:

Caste is a system of 'graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt'.

That is, as you go up the caste system the power and status of a caste group increases; as you go down the scale the degree of contempt for the caste increases as these castes have no power, are of low status and are regarded as dirty and polluting. (*Gendering Caste* 7)

Despite the societal changes, continued discrimination faced by Dalits and Sudras highlights the persistence of a particular discourse that perpetuates caste-based prejudices. Power with the support of knowledge gives birth to “absolute truth”. The production and circulation of knowledge are deeply intertwined with discursive practices, shaping individuals' understandings of reality. In plain words, it determines what is wrong and right, abnormal and normal, sinful and sinless, madness and not madness.

The persistent propagation and fortification of caste ideologies, in accordance with Althusser's insights, manifest conspicuously across diverse societal institutions—educational apparatus, media outlets, religious domains, and the intricate fabric of political and legal systems—all contributing to the sculpting and perpetuation of caste norms and hierarchies. Discriminatory practices entrenched within the corridors of learning institutions significantly contribute to the replication of these entrenched caste hierarchies. The narrative encapsulates this reality with poignant eloquence: “But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door. All the teachers were *Tyagis*, and among the students. *Tyagis* were the majority too. No one could afford to say anything against them” (*Joothan* 19). This testament serves as a poignant illustration of the deleterious impact of caste dynamics within educational environments, wherein the power dynamics perpetuate exclusion and silence, creating a lamentable chasm that elicits profound anguish.

Dalit marginalization is not only evident in explicit acts of physical violence but also structural and symbolic forms. Acts such as imposing restrictions on drinking water exemplify symbolic violence. These actions reinforce the dominance of the Brahminical ideology (*Tyagi* group) and contribute to the perpetuation of ideological hegemony. The peon's act of pouring water from a height symbolizes the imposition of symbolic violence to underscore social distinctions. Discrimination in education, employment, and social interactions reflects a systemic and ingrained form of violence. The perpetuation of discriminatory ideologies through various institutions contributes to both structural and symbolic forms of violence against Dalits, shaping their experiences and opportunities within the social fabric. The exclusion from extracurricular activities underscores how the

school, as an ideological apparatus, operates to reproduce social hierarchies. Participation in these activities serves as a site for socialization, and the denial of roles to the narrator highlights the selective inclusion of certain groups (*Tyagis*) while marginalizing others.

A Brazilian educator and philosopher, a prominent advocate for critical pedagogy and social justice Paulo Freire, “The narrative of the oppressor never tells the true story of the oppressed”. In aligning themselves with the Dalit identity, writers such as Omprakash Valmiki are actively adopting a designation rooted in the historical resistance against the entrenched caste system. Through his work, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) Valmiki portrays “a slice of life that had seldom been recorded in Indian literature until the advent of Dalit Literature in Marathi, the language of the state of Maharashtra (its capital is Bombay), in the 1950s and its subsequent spread to many other languages, notably, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and English” (xvii). The system, responsible for relegating Dalits to the marginalized status of untouchables, becomes a focal point in the collective struggle of Dalit writers. Their objective extends beyond merely challenging societal hierarchies; it encompasses the profound reconstruction of the social fabric based on fundamental principles like human dignity, equality, and mutual respect. To put it simply, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) is not just a narrative; it functions as a powerful tool that engages with and dissects the narrator's experiences, while simultaneously disrupting established silences and taboos surrounding caste-based discrimination.

One of the more implicit lessons the “canons” imparts or rather reinforces, is how professions are based on birth — perpetuating a caste-based occupational hierarchy. Martial skills, for instance, are reserved for *Kshatriyas*, and knowledge, education, and teaching are the domains of *Brahmans*. Particularly many of our ancient myths and historical texts portray and legitimize caste-based hierarchies. The social “order” depicted in the story of *Eklavya* and *Dronacharya* in the *Mahabharata* narratives often places certain castes or social groups in superior positions while marginalizing or demeaning others in a way as if these hierarchies are presented as natural or divinely ordained. Within this analogous framework, it becomes imperative to highlight the salience of Valmiki's narratives:

One day in school Master Sahib was teaching the lesson on *Dronacharya*. He told us, almost with tears in his eyes, that *Dronacharya* had fed flour dissolved in water to his famished son, *Ashwatthama*, in lieu of milk. The whole class responded with great emotion to this story of

Dronacharya's dire poverty. This episode was penned by Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, to highlight Drona's poverty. I had the temerity to stand up and ask Master Sahib a question afterward. So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar, rice water? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives? (*Joothan* 26)

In dissecting this scenario, an advanced analysis can be conducted employing the theoretical framework crafted by Louis Althusser, particularly delving into his intricate concepts of interpellation, hail, and subject formation to make us understand how the Brahminical interpretation of this myth takes different turns. The emotional teaching of Dronacharya's story by Master Sahib serves as a form of interpellation. The act of Master Sahib teaching about Dronacharya "with tears in his eyes" is a form of hail – a call or invitation to the students to recognize themselves in relation to the narrative. The students, by responding with great emotion, acknowledge this hail and position themselves as subjects within the ideological framework presented by the teacher. The narrative about Dronacharya's dire poverty hails the students, including the narrator, into a specific subject position – one that emotionally engages with and internalizes the story. The selective representation of Dronacharya's poverty in the narrative constructs a particular subject position for the students. They are positioned to empathize with the struggles of a revered figure.

However, the narrator disrupts this subject formation by questioning the omission of their own community's struggles. This challenges the dominant narrative and prompts a reconsideration of subject positions. The mention of drinking rice water as opposed to milk highlights the everyday struggles and a different socio-economic context. By expressing a sense of neglect in the epics, the narrator brings attention to the invisibility of marginalized voices and their lived experiences in mainstream storytelling. The narrator's question, "Why didn't an epic poet ever write a word about our lives?" is a critique of the ideological omissions in the narrative. It questions the authority of the narrative that selectively represents certain experiences while neglecting others. This challenges the constructed subjectivity shaped by the ideological message of the Dronacharya story. By questioning the absence of their community's narrative, the narrator resists being interpellated into a subordinate or invisible subject position.

The power lies not just in explicit rules but in the implicit norms and expectations associated with certain practices and beliefs. Those who deviate from these norms risk facing marginalization and

discrimination, illustrating how power operates within the discourse. Foucault's concepts of power and discipline are relevant in the context of the schoolmaster's awareness of Omprakash's lower caste. The schoolmaster, as a figure of authority, holds a certain power over the students. The schoolmaster's exclamation, "Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back," exemplifies a form of interpellation. The teacher and villagers assign the identity of an "untouchable", "Oe Chuhre", "Abey Chuhre", "Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink", "Abey, Chuhrey-chamars", "Chuhre ka, you dare compare yourself with Dronacharya", "Look at this Chuhre ka, pretending to be a Brahmin", and many more to the narrator and Dalit students, attempting not only to shape their subjectivity within a predetermined societal framework. But also, if viewed from the perspective of postcolonial discourse, the "labels" and ancient "myths" are a warning to the non-high caste Hindus to remain in "one's place" and help contribute to and maintain the God-given "social order." If you punch above your caste-prescribed weight, as it were, they will put the offender "in their place", possibly even by employing some extreme and/or devious measures. Simultaneously, it relies on the dichotomy between entities characterized as "the powerful" and those deemed "the powerless," spanning the realms of individuals, cultures, states, and societies.

Hence, the discourse surrounding religious identity becomes a site of power. The religious scriptures are not just passive reflections of existing norms; they actively contribute to the construction and maintenance of the caste hierarchy. Like Omprakash Valmiki and Dr Ambedkar, Dalits continue to grapple with their identities within a Hindu framework, revealing the power dynamics at play in constructs and reinforcing certain power structures. The intricate and multifaceted nature of the identity formation of Dalits explores how individuals navigate their identities within the context of Hinduism, indicating that this process is not straightforward but involves various considerations and challenges. The day-to-day "normal" experiences of injustice faced by Dalits in India are not recent phenomena; instead, they have endured through time. "In rural areas, Dalits continue to face physical violence, including mass killings and rapes by vigilante groups established and operated by high-caste landowners, when Dalits ask for fair wages and freedom from molestation. The authorities seldom apprehend and punish the perpetrators of such violence" (*Joothan* xxxii).

These "statuses" engender a palpable sentiment of rejection and disillusionment concerning Omprakash Valmiki's affiliation with the Hindu

identity: "Neither am I a Hindu' If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill up with caste inferiority over the smallest things?... I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak/ why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?" (48). In plain words, the narrator disavowed his identification as a Hindu, stating, "Neither am I a Hindu." The speaker's anguish over the perceived cruelty and heartlessness of Hindus, particularly towards Dalits is reflected through the rhetorical question, "Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?", conveys a deep sense of betrayal and injustice, questioning the moral character of those who perpetrate discrimination. This persistence and severity require a comprehensive understanding of their historical evolution to effectively address and rectify them.

Deeper within, it shows an act that challenges the dominant discourse that seeks to maintain hierarchical power relations. The speaker's questioning of the discriminatory practices faced by Dalits disrupts the discourse that upholds caste superiority. By highlighting the cruelty and discrimination experienced since childhood, the speaker subverts the dominant narrative that perpetuates caste-based prejudices. The disavowal of "absolute identity" entails the disavowal of "absolute truth"—a form of counter-discourse, an attempt to reshape the narrative surrounding the historical actions of dominant castes; questioning the outcomes of claimed valour and greatness embedded in historical caste-based narratives. This counter-discourse seeks to destabilize the dominant discourse that reinforces the hierarchical social structure.

Conclusion

One may find that modern society has loosened the tentacles of Caste but it finds another way of keeping us in its clutch. Therefore, "Interpellation" is a 21st-century concept, that expresses the fundamental relationship between subjects and ideology in contemporary society. aggressive proselytizing efforts It is because "power is not possessed" but employed, circulated, and exercised, moreover, "an open-ended game." The method of power undergoes a transformation that is no longer guaranteed by rights but by technique, not through legislation, but normalization. The discriminatory practices against untouchables are not just random acts; they are part of a broader system of governmentality that regulates and controls certain populations based on constructed notions of purity and impurity. This suggests Foucault's questioning or contemplation about the idea: "Should it be said

that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case?" (*The History of Sexuality* 95). Herein lies the elucidation to the posed question:

Where there is power, there is resistance . . . Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible. (*The History of Sexuality* 95-96)

Valmiki's experiences are not isolated incidents but are embedded in interrogating a larger discourse that legitimizes the marginalization of certain groups. Omprakash's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) can be seen as Spivak's "strategic essentialism" (act), Foucault's "discourse"- a tool for contestation and transformation, Althusser's distinction between ISAs and RSAs provides a framework for analyzing how institutions, such as education and the legal system, function to maintain social order. Ambedkar's "Social Democracy", "political representation", principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity as essential foundations for a just and democratic society.

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