

**Caste, Trauma, and Social Exclusion in Contemporary Indian English Fiction:
A Study of Marginalised Identity and Resistance**

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Abstract:

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly become an important literary space for examining caste, social inequality, psychological trauma, and the experiences of marginalised communities. Caste is not merely represented as a traditional social institution but as a continuing structure that influences identity, relationships, education, occupation, dignity, and access to social power. This article examines the interconnectedness of caste, trauma, and social exclusion in selected contemporary Indian English fictional narratives. It argues that caste-based discrimination produces not only material deprivation but also deep psychological wounds that affect individual and collective identity. The study further explores how humiliation, silence, segregation, violence, and exclusion are transformed into forms of memory, consciousness, and resistance. Drawing upon Dalit literary criticism, postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and subaltern perspectives, the article considers the ways in which contemporary fiction challenges dominant representations of caste and gives narrative visibility to marginalised experiences. Recent scholarship observes that caste remains a significant category for analysing Indian Anglophone fiction, while newer studies increasingly emphasise Dalit consciousness and counter-narratives. The article therefore argues that contemporary Indian English fiction does not merely document caste oppression; it also questions the structures that sustain social exclusion and creates imaginative possibilities for dignity, agency, and resistance.

Keywords: Caste; Trauma; Social Exclusion; Dalit Identity; Marginalisation; Resistance; Indian English Fiction

Introduction

Caste has remained one of the most persistent structures of social organisation in Indian society. Although modern democratic institutions have challenged several traditional forms of caste discrimination, caste continues to influence social relationships, cultural practices, economic opportunities, and individual identities. Literature, particularly fiction, provides an important space for examining these continuing inequalities because it can represent the emotional and psychological consequences of social structures through individual lives.

Indian English fiction has a long history of engaging with caste. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* brought the humiliation experienced by an untouchable protagonist into the field of Indian English literature, while later writers developed more complex representations of caste, class, gender, and social mobility. Contemporary scholarship has noted that Indian Anglophone fiction has often represented caste through characters whose social position is shaped by linguistic, economic, and cultural hierarchies. At the same time, recent Dalit and anti-caste writing has increasingly challenged representations produced exclusively from dominant social perspectives.

The literary representation of caste becomes particularly significant when it is studied alongside trauma. Caste oppression does not end with a particular act of discrimination. Repeated humiliation, exclusion, verbal abuse, physical violence, denial of dignity, and social segregation can become psychologically internalised. Trauma, therefore, can be understood not simply as an individual psychological experience but also as a consequence of historically and socially organised violence. Recent critical work on Indian English fiction similarly connects caste-based oppression with trauma, memory, identity, and institutional violence.

Social exclusion is another important dimension of this problem. Caste determines who can enter certain spaces, establish particular relationships, participate in social institutions, or claim dignity within the community. Fiction makes these invisible boundaries visible by showing how ordinary spaces homes, schools, streets, workplaces, temples, villages, and public institutions can become sites of discrimination.

Suggested integration

The economic consequences of caste-based exclusion are clearly visible in the description of the livelihood of Untouchable communities. Their marginalisation is not limited to social or religious discrimination; it extends into employment, access to natural

resources, and the marketplace. The passage demonstrates how the absence of regular agricultural employment forces Untouchables to depend upon precarious forms of labour:

When the agricultural season is over the Untouchables have no employment and no means of earning a living. In such seasons they subsist by cutting grass and firewood from the jungle and sell it in a nearby town. Even when it is open it depends upon the forest guard. Only if he is bribed he will let them take some grass and firewood from the Government forest. When it is brought to the town they have always to face a buyer's market. The Hindus who are the main body of buyers will always conspire to beat down the wages. Having no power to hold out, the Untouchables have to sell their stuff for whatever is offered to them. Often times they have to walk 10 miles each way from the village to the town and back to sell their stuff. (27)

This passage reveals that caste operates through a combination of economic dependency, institutional corruption, and social power. The phrase “no employment and no means of earning a living” establishes the economic vulnerability of the community. Their dependence on forest resources does not provide genuine freedom because access itself is controlled by the forest guard. The requirement of a bribe demonstrates how institutional authority can reinforce the vulnerability of already marginalised people. Their exploitation continues in the marketplace, where buyers possess greater economic power and can dictate the price of their labour and goods.

Particularly significant is the statement that the Untouchables have “no power to hold out.” Their economic condition removes their ability to negotiate. The passage therefore presents caste as a system that produces structural powerlessness rather than merely interpersonal prejudice. Even when they work, their labour does not guarantee economic security or dignity. The ten-mile journey undertaken to sell grass and firewood further illustrates the physical burden imposed upon an economically excluded community. Thus, social exclusion becomes simultaneously economic, spatial, and bodily.

The passage also helps establish the relationship between caste and trauma. Repeated economic humiliation and the inability to control one's own labour can create a persistent sense of insecurity and powerlessness. The community's suffering is not caused by a single traumatic incident; rather, it emerges through the continuous repetition of unequal social and economic relations. In this sense, the narrative anticipates the later development of caste trauma as a collective and structural experience.

The present study therefore examines caste, trauma, and social exclusion as interconnected rather than separate categories. It argues that the literary representation of caste reveals a movement from victimhood towards consciousness and resistance. Contemporary anti-caste fiction increasingly provides marginalised characters with narrative agency rather than presenting them merely as passive victims. This development is particularly important because recent scholarship has questioned whether mainstream Indian English fiction has adequately represented Dalit subjectivity and has called attention to the difference between representing Dalit characters and producing narratives grounded in Dalit consciousness.

The central argument of this article is that caste produces social exclusion, social exclusion generates psychological and cultural trauma, and the narration of that trauma can become an instrument of resistance. Literature consequently functions not merely as a reflection of caste society but as a site where dominant social structures can be questioned.

1. Caste as a Structure of Social Exclusion

Caste operates through a complex network of hierarchy, purity, pollution, occupation, marriage, space, and social power. Its literary representation therefore cannot be reduced to individual prejudice. A character may experience exclusion not because of a single person's hatred but because an entire community accepts particular hierarchies as normal.

This distinction is important in reading contemporary Indian English fiction. The problem of caste is often embedded within everyday activities rather than appearing only through spectacular acts of violence. Eating, entering a house, using public facilities, forming relationships, obtaining employment, or participating in religious practices may become occasions through which caste boundaries are reproduced.

Such representation transforms the novel into a social document, but its importance extends beyond documentation. Fiction enables readers to experience exclusion through character, narrative perspective, dialogue, memory, and space. The reader is therefore encouraged to recognise how apparently ordinary social practices can carry histories of oppression.

2. Caste and Psychological Trauma

Trauma provides another significant framework for understanding caste oppression. The traumatic experience of caste is frequently repetitive rather than singular. An individual

may

encounter discrimination at school, in the workplace, within the family, and in the larger community. Such experiences accumulate and influence self-perception.

The relationship between caste and trauma is therefore both personal and collective. A traumatic experience may belong to one character, but its origins lie in a larger social structure. Memories of humiliation may also be transmitted through families and communities, creating what can be described as a cultural or collective dimension of trauma.

This perspective prevents trauma from being treated simply as an individual psychological problem. Instead, it connects emotional suffering with structures of power. In this sense, the literary representation of trauma becomes a method of exposing the social causes of suffering.

3. Silence, Memory, and Marginalised Identity

Silence is another important feature of caste-based exclusion. Marginalised characters are frequently denied the authority to speak about their own experiences. Their histories may be suppressed, distorted, or narrated by socially privileged voices.

Contemporary Dalit writing challenges this condition by transforming silence into testimony. The act of narrating discrimination itself becomes an assertion of identity. Recent scholarship on Dalit literature emphasises the importance of counter-narratives that challenge dominant forms of knowledge and representation.

Memory consequently becomes politically significant. Remembering an experience of humiliation prevents the social structure responsible for that experience from disappearing into the past. The literary recovery of memory can therefore function as an act of resistance.

4. From Victimhood to Resistance

One of the most significant developments in contemporary representations of caste is the movement from passive victimhood to active resistance. Earlier representations could sometimes position marginalised characters primarily as objects of sympathy. Contemporary anti-caste writing increasingly foregrounds consciousness, self-respect, anger, assertion, and collective action.

This distinction is important because representation itself involves questions of power. Who speaks? Who is represented? From whose perspective is caste understood? Who has the authority to narrate suffering? Recent scholarship on Indian English fiction has specifically questioned representations of Dalit characters from dominant-caste perspectives and emphasised the importance of Ambedkarite and Dalit consciousness. Thus, the

contemporary caste novel should be read not merely for what it says about discrimination but also for who is given narrative authority.

5. Caste, Gender, and Intersectional Exclusion

Caste oppression cannot always be separated from gender. Dalit women, for instance, may experience discrimination through both caste and patriarchal structures. Contemporary Indian English writing increasingly explores this intersection, showing that marginalisation is not experienced uniformly.

The procession was a most peaceful one and everything passed off quietly. But after about two hours some evil minded leaders of the town raised a false rumour that the depressed classes were planning to enter the temple of Vireshwar, whereupon a large crowd of riffraff had collected all armed with bamboo sticks. The crowd soon became aggressive and the whole town at once became a surging mass of rowdies, who seemed to be out for the blood of the depressed classes. (276)

Critical analysis:

The passage presents caste discrimination as a collective form of social violence rather than an isolated act of individual prejudice. The procession initially remains peaceful, but the situation changes when the leaders circulate a “false rumour” concerning the supposed intention of the “depressed classes” to enter the temple. The incident demonstrates how caste-based exclusion can be sustained through the manipulation of public fear. The temple becomes more than a religious space; it becomes a symbolic boundary separating socially privileged groups from those who have historically been denied equal access.

The transformation of the crowd into a violent force is particularly significant. The description of people armed with “bamboo sticks” suggests that prejudice has moved from an ideological level to the possibility of physical violence. The phrase “out for the blood of the depressed classes” makes the threat of violence explicit. Thus, the passage connects religious exclusion, collective prejudice, rumour, and bodily danger. The marginalised community is represented as being vulnerable not only to everyday discrimination but also to sudden collective violence.

This episode also strengthens the article's argument concerning trauma. When a community repeatedly encounters threats, humiliation, and violence, fear can become part of collective memory. The traumatic experience consequently extends beyond the immediate incident. The memory of violence can influence how marginalised people understand public

spaces, religious institutions, and relationships with dominant communities. The passage therefore helps demonstrate how social exclusion can produce both immediate suffering and long-term psychological consequences.

The intersection of caste and gender also changes the nature of resistance. A woman may have to challenge caste hierarchy outside the home while simultaneously negotiating patriarchal authority within the family. Contemporary criticism has consequently employed Dalit feminism and intersectionality to examine how caste and gender operate together.

Conclusion

Caste, trauma, and social exclusion constitute interconnected dimensions of contemporary Indian English fiction. Caste functions not simply as a social classification but as a structure that determines access to dignity, space, relationships, education, and power. Its consequences are therefore both material and psychological.

The representation of trauma enables fiction to reveal the lasting effects of caste discrimination on individual and collective consciousness. At the same time, memory provides marginalised characters with a means of recovering experiences that dominant social structures attempt to silence. The movement from silence to narration and from victimhood to resistance becomes one of the most important characteristics of contemporary anti-caste literary representation.

Contemporary Indian English fiction consequently performs a dual function. It exposes the continuing reality of caste-based exclusion while creating imaginative spaces for resistance and self-assertion. Its significance lies not only in representing oppressed communities but also in questioning the structures of knowledge and power through which those communities have historically been represented. As recent scholarship demonstrates, caste remains a central and necessary category for analysing Indian Anglophone literature.

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