SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;**Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF) **ISSN:** 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-5(May);2026**

Caste Violence and Subaltern Consciousness: Reading Basudev Sunani's *Burnt: Beyond Return*

Dr. Gurudev Kushal
Lecturer in English**,**Larambha College, Larambha, Bargarh, Odisha, India

Article Received: 20/04/2026
Article Accepted:23/05/2026
Published Online:24/05/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.367

Abstract

This paper examines Basudev Sunani's novel Burnt: Beyond Return—originally written in Odia 'Padaa Poddi' and translated into English by Raj Kumar—as a literary document of caste violence and its aftermath in rural Odisha. Drawing on subaltern studies, trauma theory, and postcolonial translation scholarship, the paper argues that Sunani's narrative constructs caste violence not as an isolated atrocity but as the visible culmination of long-standing structural oppression. Through the protagonist Makaru's return to a burnt Dalit settlement, the novel encodes subaltern consciousness in memory, silence, displaced identity, and the quiet persistence of everyday survival. The paper further examines how Raj Kumar's translation carries regionally rooted Dalit experience into a broader academic conversation without erasing its cultural specificity.

Keywords: Caste violence, Dalit literature, subaltern consciousness, Odisha, trauma, translation, Burnt: Beyond Return

Introduction

Caste-based violence is not a relic of the past; it continues to scar Indian society with uncomfortable regularity, especially in rural regions where hierarchies are stitched into daily life in ways that constitutional guarantees have struggled to unravel. Marginalized communities, Dalits in particular, navigate an existence defined by systemic exclusion, spatial segregation, and the ever-present threat of retributive violence whenever inherited social scripts are disturbed. Literature, in this context, has historically done what official records tend not to do—it has given form and voice to the lived interior of oppression, producing narratives that resist the smoothing over of suffering.

Basudev Sunani's novel *Burnt: Beyond Return* stands as precisely this kind of literary intervention. Drawn from a real incident in which an upper-caste mob burned down a Dalit settlement in Lathore village, Odisha, the novel refuses the sensational logic of disaster

narrative. It does not linger on the fire itself. Instead, it asks what comes after—how does a community remember, how does identity survive displacement, and what does the act of return mean when there is almost nothing to return to? These questions, rendered in Odia and brought to a wider readership through Raj Kumar's English translation, make the novel a significant contribution to both Dalit literature and the regional literary tradition of Odisha. This paper reads *Burnt: Beyond Return* through the overlapping lenses of subaltern studies, trauma theory, and translation ethics. Its central argument is that Sunani articulates subaltern consciousness not as an ideology declared from outside but as an awareness shaped from within—by memory, land, community, and the small, persistent gestures through which the oppressed refuse to be entirely erased.

Caste Violence as Structure: The Odisha Context

To understand what Sunani is doing in this novel, one must resist the temptation to read the burning of the Dalit settlement as an exceptional event. Ambedkar's foundational critique of caste as a system that does not merely discriminate but actively divides and subdivides social life helps explain why violence in caste-structured societies carries a logic beyond individual cruelty (Ambedkar 45). In Odisha's rural interiors, this logic is embedded in how space is organized, how labor is compensated, and how much dignity is permitted to those at the margins.

Sunani's narrative is attentive to this structural dimension. The burning is never presented as spontaneous rage; the novel accumulates small detail—a dispute over a well, a wage argument, words spoken in a tone considered too direct—to suggest that what the fire destroyed had been under threat long before any match was struck. When Makaru returns to the village, he encounters not the memory of a single night but the visible residue of years of enforced subordination. The phrase he finds himself thinking—that the soil still smelled of smoke even after the rains—captures this precisely: trauma does not confine itself to the moment of its origin (Sunani).

The spatial arrangement of the village reinforces this reading. The Dalit settlement has always occupied the margins—geographically removed, as Lefebvre might argue, because social hierarchy is inscribed into the very layout of the built environment. After the burning, that marginal space becomes something more unsettling: an empty stretch no one wished to cross (Sunani). The surviving upper-caste houses, described as standing untouched, watching, create a visual asymmetry that is impossible to read as accidental. The destruction is selective; the geography of power remains intact. This is how caste violence communicates: it destroys precisely, leaving dominant structures in place as a reminder of what hierarchy looks like when enforced. Sunani also embeds a quieter critique in Makaru's experience of estrangement from the land itself. Walking through the ruins, Makaru wonders whether the soil still recognized his footsteps (Sunani). The question is not rhetorical; it is the expression of a severed relationship. For Dalit communities whose identity has been bound, generation after generation, to particular plots of ground, displacement from that ground is

not merely a housing problem. It is an ontological rupture—the loss of the terrain through which selfhood and community have been articulated. Ambedkar's insistence that caste denies the oppressed a sense of fraternity finds in this detail a quietly devastating narrative expression (Ambedkar 47).

Dalit Writing and the Articulation of Subaltern Consciousness

Dalit literature in India has done something historically significant: it has shifted the narrative of marginalization from representation by others toward first-person testimony. This shift is not merely aesthetic. It carries a political charge, producing what Sharankumar Limbale calls an aesthetics of lived experience—a formal commitment to the texture of suffering as it is actually inhabited, not as it is observed from the outside (Limbale 89). Sunani's novel participates in this tradition, though its contribution is distinctive in that subaltern consciousness here does not announce itself in the language of protest. It surfaces in the way a character lingers over a smell, hesitates before a name, or returns to a place knowing there is nothing there to return to. Gramsci's concept of subaltern consciousness is useful here precisely because it does not require formal ideology or organized political opposition (Gramsci 12). Consciousness, in this sense, is what accrues through the lived experience of domination—through what the body learns to expect, what the mind learns to suppress, and what the community holds in its collective memory because no one else will. Makaru does not deliver speeches. He walks through ruins, notices ash clinging to the soil like a stubborn memory, and finds that even ordinary movement through familiar terrain has become fraught. His awareness of his situation is not borrowed from any political vocabulary; it has been built from the inside out, through experience.

Crucially, the novel frames this consciousness as collective rather than heroic and individual. The phrase we carried the night inside us (Sunani) transforms trauma into communal identity. It suggests that suffering in caste society is rarely private; it is shared in a way that creates bonds even in devastation. When elders name those who once lived in the settlement, the act of naming becomes a form of archiving, a way of holding a community in existence against the forces that sought to erase it. This is precisely the mode of subaltern consciousness that Guha identifies as operating outside elite textual records—preserved instead in memory, ritual, oral exchange, and the gestures of daily life (Guha 6).

Narrative Form and the Ethics of Representing Violence

One of the most striking features of Sunani's novel is its formal restraint. The burning of the settlement, which could easily have been the set piece of a more conventional narrative, is conspicuously absent from direct narration. The reader never witnesses the event; it is approached obliquely, through Makaru's hesitant recollections, interrupted sentences, and the altered landscape he walks through. This is not evasion. It is a considered ethical choice about how suffering should be represented—and how it should not.

Cathy Caruth's observation that trauma is characterized by belatedness—that the event makes itself known through fragments rather than full, coherent representation—

illuminates Sunani's technique (Caruth 4). The burning returns in broken phrases, pauses, and narrative gaps rather than sustained description. A character remarks, we do not speak of that night, and the text abruptly shifts register, leaving the silence to carry its own meaning (Sunani). This refusal of articulation is not evasion; it is, as LaCapra might suggest, symptomatic of what he calls acting out—the condition in which the past remains unassimilated, returning not as narrative but as disruption (LaCapra 41). The non-linear structure of the novel reinforces these effects. Makaru's return journey moves simultaneously forward through space and backward through memory, so that physical movement and psychological excavation become the same activity. The novel's fragmented sequencing—short recollections interrupted by descriptive pauses, dialogue that trails off—mirrors the fractured temporality that trauma imposes on experience. Rather than offering a clean chronology, the text asks its reader to assemble meaning from residue, which is also what Makaru is doing as he walks. This structural focus on aftermath rather than event transforms what the novel is about. Empty courtyards, silent wells, and roads that no longer led home (Sunani) are the novel's real subject—not the fire, but the shapes it left behind in daily life. By locating violence in its prolonged social consequences rather than its spectacular moment, Sunani resists converting suffering into something consumable. The reader does not witness a horror; the reader encounters an altered world and must reckon with what produced it.

Memory, Trauma, and Collective Remembrance

Memory in *Burnt: Beyond Return* is not a private faculty. It functions as a collective archive—something the community holds together rather than individually, preserved across oral exchange, shared silence, and the accumulated gesture of everyday life. When Makaru recalls how the drums once echoed across the fields during festivals and how evenings gathered us in one courtyard (Sunani), these images are not nostalgic ornament. They are fragments of a cultural continuity that the burning severed. Their juxtaposition with the present silence and blackened ground measures the scale of what was destroyed: not merely shelter, but an entire rhythm of communal existence.

Sunani's prose enacts this condition at the level of sentence and syntax. Ellipses appear where description might be expected; recollections begin and are abandoned mid-thought. The phrase that night… we do not speak of it (Sunani) captures a community that has not yet found a way to narrate its own most defining experience—not because the experience is forgotten, but because speech has not caught up with the weight of what happened. Silence here is not emptiness; it is charged with suppressed grief, residual fear, and the dignity of those who will not perform their wounds for an outside audience.

This brings the novel into dialogue with Spivak's central question about the conditions under which the subaltern can speak (Spivak 287). Sunani's characters do not speak in the register the dominant culture would recognize as political declaration. Their speech is partial, hesitant, mediated through memory and kinship. Yet it is not absent. Remembrance itself becomes a form of testimony; collective narration transforms trauma

into a fragile but enduring historical presence—precisely the kind of subaltern history that Guha argues must be recovered from beyond the boundaries of elite documentation (Guha 3).

Land, Displacement, and the Politics of Belonging

The Dalit community in the novel has an intimate, generationally layered relationship with land. The settlement is described not only as a place of habitation but as the soil where our fathers' shadows still walked (Sunani)—a formulation that ties identity to a specific terrain through the labor and presence of those who came before. This is not romantic pastoralism; it is a claim to historical rootedness that caste society has systematically denied by associating Dalit communities with temporariness, disposability, and the absence of legitimate spatial claim.

When the settlement burns and the community disperses, the loss is not reducible to destroyed property. The novel tracks how characters who leave for daily-wage labor in unfamiliar towns describe themselves as living nowhere fully (Sunani)—suspended between the ruins of a past they cannot return to and an urban present that offers no stable ground. Jodhka's sociological work on caste-marked displacement identifies precisely this dynamic: forced mobility for Dalit communities tends to reproduce vulnerability rather than create opportunity, because the absence of land and secure settlement forecloses the social networks through which economic stability is built (Jodhka 120). Yet the novel does not remain at the level of loss. Makaru's attachment to the burnt site persists; even when nothing remained but hardened ash, he experiences the space as still ours in some stubborn way (Sunani). This emotional geography—belonging surviving material destruction through affective memory—suggests that land carries meanings that dispossession cannot fully extinguish. The struggle for spatial recognition and territorial rights, the novel implies, is inseparable from the broader struggle for dignity. To return to a place that has been razed is to insist that its history belongs to those who lived it, not to those who attempted to erase it.

Translation and the Ethics of Representation

Raj Kumar's English translation of *Burnt: Beyond Return* presents challenges that go beyond the technical difficulties of moving between Odia and English. The novel's meaning is embedded in caste-specific idioms, kinship vocabularies, and rhythms of speech that carry social information—who is speaking, to whom, with what degree of deference or defiance—that a domesticating translation would flatten into neutrality. Kumar navigates this by retaining the textural foreignness of the original, following Venuti's principle that a foreignizing translation preserves what is culturally distinct rather than smoothing it for the convenience of a global readership (Venuti 15).

Bassnett's observation that translation is always an interpretive act shaped by cultural responsibility rather than mechanical equivalence is directly applicable here (Bassnett 23). Kumar's choices—in preserving phrases like our burning hamlet or maintaining the specific cadence of communal speech—ensure that the reader encounters caste-inflected suffering in its regional particularity rather than as a generalized story of

displacement. The translation does not universalize; it situates. At the same time, the translation performs an archival function: it carries a regionally embedded Dalit experience into national and international academic conversation. A narrative that might otherwise have remained within Odia-language literary circuits becomes legible to scholars working in subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and comparative Dalit literature. This expanded reach is not without its own ethical stakes—the risk of exoticization or misreading is real—but Kumar's careful retention of cultural specificity largely guards against it.

Resistance Without Spectacle

Perhaps the most politically important move the novel makes is its refusal to equate resistance with dramatic confrontation. Makaru does not organize, agitate, or confront the perpetrators of the burning. He returns. He walks through what remains. He remembers. And these acts, in the context of caste society's sustained effort to produce invisibility and displacement in marginalized communities, are genuinely political. Scott's concept of the hidden transcripts of subordinate groups—the forms of resistance that operate below the threshold of formal opposition—illuminates what Sunani is doing: presenting survival, memory, and return as modes of dissent rather than passivity.

When elders name those who once lived in the settlement, they are reconstructing a community that the burning sought to eliminate. When survivors rebuild huts on the same ground that had rejected them (Sunani), they are refusing the message that the fire was intended to deliver. These are not heroic gestures in any conventional literary sense; they are quiet, stubborn, and cumulative. Gramsci's argument that subaltern groups sustain counter-hegemonic consciousness through cultural practices rather than formal institutions finds in these moments a precise narrative embodiment (Gramsci 12). The novel's title encapsulates this tension. Beyond return might suggest finality—that the destruction is irreversible, that innocence cannot be recovered. But Makaru's physical return complicates this fatalism. He comes back not because conditions have improved but because the act of returning is itself a refusal to accept displacement as destiny. Memory reconstructs what violence tried to erase; presence insists on a history that the powerful would prefer to forget. In this sense, the novel aligns closely with Guha's subaltern historiography—the effort to recover experiential depth from lives that official narratives reduce to absences or statistics (Guha 3).

Conclusion

Burnt: Beyond Return achieves something that more polemic treatments of caste violence often do not: it makes the reader feel the weight of what comes after. By subordinating the event to its aftermath—by centering memory, displacement, silence, and the texture of loss rather than the drama of the fire itself—Sunani constructs caste violence as something temporally extended and structurally produced, not a momentary eruption but a condition with deep roots and long shadows.

Subaltern consciousness in the novel emerges not from declarations but from the accumulation of small, charged details: the smell of smoke in soil after rain, the estrangement

of a familiar landscape, the refusal to speak and the insistence on naming, the act of rebuilding on ground that others would rather remain vacant. These are not metaphors for resistance; they are its actual substance. Sunani's formal choices—restraint, fragmentation, and indirection—are inseparable from this political content: to narrate suffering without converting it into spectacle is itself an ethical stance. Raj Kumar's translation extends the novel's reach without diminishing its specificity, confirming that regional Dalit literatures need not sacrifice their cultural particularity in order to enter broader scholarly conversations. What the translation carries is not only a story from Odisha but a mode of witnessing—attentive, unspectacular, and morally serious— that literary scholarship on caste violence has much to learn from. The novel affirms that literature's capacity to document and resist does not depend on volume or outrage. A charred field, a returning figure, the memory of an evening courtyard—these are sufficient. From them, Sunani builds something that fire cannot reduce: an enduring record of lives, losses, and the quiet, tenacious refusal to disappear.

Works Cited

Ambedkar, B. R. Annihilation of Caste. Navayana, 2014.

Bassnett, Susan. Translation Studies. 4th ed., Routledge, 2014.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Gramsci, Antonio. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.

Guha, Ranajit, editor. Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Oxford UP, 1982.

Jodhka, Surinder S. Caste. Oxford UP, 2012.

Kumar, Raj. Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity. Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Literature and Criticism*. Orient BlackSwan, 2019.

Kumar, Raj, translator. Burnt: Beyond Return. By Basudev Sunani, Orient Blackswan, 2025.

LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Limbale, Sharankumar. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Blackswan, 2004.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Sunani, Basudev. Burnt: Beyond Return. Translated by Raj Kumar, Orient Blackswan, 2025.

Venuti, Lawrence. The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.