

Precarious Self and/in the Dalit Everyday Social: 'Passing'¹, Affect, and Alienation in Ajay Navaria's Select Stories

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In their portrayal of the everyday as something that has an elusive nature and cannot be contained, Blanchot and Hanson observe that the everyday is never perceived anew, rather it is what we “only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday” (14). There are multiple layers to the everyday-ness, the ordinariness of life, of being. The repetitive occurrences in the ordinary creep in like a habit. In the context of the everyday, when we turn to the geographical location of South Asia, with a special focus on India, we find interesting, often invisibilised, and most perilous habits, habits that are marked by the performance of caste. Caste has been described by Ambedkar as fostering majorly “the principle of graded inequality” (qtd. in Moon 106) in the Indian society that dictates and is seeped into the everyday existence of Dalits and everyday practices of the ‘upper’ castes. The pervasiveness of caste is associated with its ability to morph itself in the modern world. In the mundanity of things and processes, it is pertinent to understand how the Dalit self navigates the everyday, which is deeply marked by the practices of caste.

In the fast-paced urban life, encounters with caste halt the movement and progress, ever so often, of the physical and the psychological. While the halting in the physicality of the transaction might seem momentary, it leaves a deep imprint on the psyche. The mind is halted in the scrutiny of its own body whereby the urban Dalits, even the economically secured ones, are compelled to scrutinise the periphery of their body, with a feeling of shame, in terms of purity and pollution that is forced onto them through the notions of untouchability. The controlling and systematisation of touchability that occurs at a lower level than “formalized regulations on marriage and eating together” is, as Aniket Jaavre argues, an “attempt to institutionalise that which is essentially accidental and random” (20). These random acts and chance encounters exist in traces of the quotidian. Therefore, by institutionalising the very basic and arbitrary act of touch, caste marks its control over the everyday and also through the everyday. The institution of caste then delves into and thrives through the affectivity of humiliation played out on the Dalit self. Caste is sustained through the everyday sociocultural practices and performances of humiliation, and at the same time, it is in the everyday itself that caste is constantly challenged and critiqued through the basic acts of survival and by the mechanisms deployed by Dalits to navigate the urban setting. Taking up a modern and somewhat fractured tool of self-fashioning at their disposal provided by modernity and economic mobility, the rules of social settings are subverted by Dalits. The various modes of self-making and remaking in the context of the everyday involve the concealment of their caste identities and by ‘passing’ as non-Dalits. This is achieved by hiding their surnames and cultural practices or by indulging in ‘upper’ caste and class habits. Even though deployed as a tool of self-preservation in everyday social existence, the technique of ‘passing’ involves, as Gajarawala highlights, a “radical sense of precarity ... risk, instability, fugitivity, refusal, revelation” (“Dragging Caste” 163) in the Dalit’s navigation of the modern social terrain of the everyday. The everyday then becomes a space marked by complexities and a space flooding with possibilities.

Thinking of the ‘everyday’ as an experience works in sync with the Dalit reality of Indian society. In a society that is deeply committed to maintaining the ‘upper’ caste hegemony, where everything is dictated by its stringent rules, the everyday becomes an experience for Dalits where their very existence is met with resistance, and so the performative acts deployed in navigating these spaces are seen as subversive ones. The ‘everyday’, in this context, becomes a contested terrain, where the sites of dominance are also transformed into sites of resistance and subversion. It is in this light that the stories of Ajay Navaria play out in his anthology *Unclaimed Terrain*.

Published in 2013 and translated from Hindi to English by Laura Brueck, the stories are placed in urban settings and rooted in Dalit realism that is marked by a perilous existence in everyday society. Exhibiting Dalit *chetna* or Dalit consciousness, the characters navigate the 'unclaimed terrain' of the quotidian affairs. In the analysis of the precarious constructions of the self, embodied in the everyday occurrences marked with instability, the analysis of this paper is restricted to four out of the six stories in the collection, namely, "Scream," "Subcontinent," "Tattoo," and "New Custom."

The focus of the narratives in *Unclaimed Terrain* is "on the Dalit individual rather than on the community" (Brueck 123). This focus allows the author to flirt with time, space, and memory in the form of flashbacks and spatial and temporal transitions. The individual characters that inhabit the *Unclaimed Terrain* are filled with pride, honour, dignity, and consciousness even though they do not exhibit these emotions overtly. They follow Ambedkar's ideals and represent a need for social change. These characters, as Gajarawala notes, "have long abandoned the village and navigate the vicissitudes of urban life, exhibiting a kind of postcaste consciousness" (*Untouchable Fictions* 156). Even though Navaria's characters are individualistic and represent an urban modern Dalit person who has moved up the ladder of class, they constitute a collective experience that drives towards a social change, thus transforming the everyday from a habitual humiliating state into a site where revolutionary acts materialise.

In order to critically analyse the stories of Navaria, it is important to first understand the concepts of Dalit *chetna* and Dalit realism in the context of Hindi Dalit literature. The inhabitancy of Dalits in literature is a recent intervention. With a call to upturn the politics of representation, Dalit literature designs its own aesthetics that foregrounds the Dalit consciousness, all the while being rooted in the ideas of resistance and protest. In the case of Hindi Dalit literature, the Dalit consciousness or Dalit *chetna* is grounded in a new kind of realism that has been left untouched by its literary giants. Developing fully in the periods of post-Mandal commission and post-Ambedkarite phase, Hindi Dalit literature addresses the nuances of modernity, affirmative action, and the everyday subtle performances of caste. In mainstream modern Hindi literature, the writings of Premchand have claimed a special place. But the "rhetoric of sympathy" (Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions* 33) and stereotypical representation of oppressed castes in these writings have garnered much criticism in the Hindi Dalit literary sphere. What was lacking was a Dalit intervention. Hindi Dalit literature proposes a new form of social realism to counter the social realism in modern Hindi literature, which failed to capture Dalit reality and dignity. It is this desire for dignity that is propelled by Dalit consciousness, which is shown in Hindi Dalit writings. Taking inspiration from Ambedkar's philosophy, Dalit consciousness disrupts the hegemonic dominance in literature through Dalit articulation. Challenging the casteist, feudalistic and capitalistic frameworks, 'Dalit *chetna*' or Dalit consciousness forms "the inner energy of dalit literature" (Jain 13). Laura Brueck's study "Dalit *Chetna* in Dalit Literary Criticism" examines the concept of Dalit *chetna* as an evolving approach within Dalit critical discourse, positing it as the central force of a Dalit text. Furthermore, Gandhi's idealistic portrayal of the village tended to ignore its reality as a casteist hub. The place where "India begins and ends" (qtd. in Jodhka 103) for Gandhi is viewed by Ambedkar as a space which a Dalit could never inhabit with respect and dignity, as they have been physically cast out of this mainstream structure by the violent system of caste. Being what Ambedkar calls "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism" (qtd. in Krishna Web), these villages can offer nothing but social degradation and humiliation to Dalits. It is in this light that the space of the city emerges as a promise of freedom and equality to the Dalits by providing anonymity and modernity. In this context, Ashis Nandy argues that the space and anonymity that a city provides is "doubly seductive in a society scarred by socio-economic schisms and cultural hierarchies" (12). Dalits who seek to move away from the "daily

grind and violence of a caste society,” argues Nandy, “value the impersonal melting pot of a metropolitan city” (12).

However, the terrain of the modern world unfolds itself in complex ways. The anonymity provided by the urban comes at the cost of loneliness. Experiences of humiliation in the space of modernity and the treatment of modernity by Dalits are interesting points to venture into that intertwine and create a dilemma within the Dalit subject in his/her everyday encounters. There occurs a psychological fissure within the framework of the performance of caste concealment that is a means to escape humiliation. The selected stories from Ajay Navaria’s anthology revolve around the lives of urban Dalit men and the liberty that the city’s anonymity provides them. In one of his stories titled “New Custom,” Navaria, through his protagonist, critiques this urban capitalist world by calling it “a man’s world, where women are treated like objects” and where it is difficult to distinguish between the product and the customer (68). Navaria chooses Dalit men as his protagonists, and one can find the minimal presence of women in this urban space, probably to reflect on the problematic and objectified images of women that modernity unfolds. In the story “Scream,” this objectification is further complicated in the city space where the male protagonist, who encounters different women owing to his profession as a masseur and a male sex worker, views women as “just bodies” even though he himself gets objectified by them. It is interesting to note how the presence of Dalit women has been almost entirely erased from the urban space that Navaria creates in his fiction. Their presence in the stories “New Custom,” “Subcontinent,” and “Tattoo” is limited to them being partners of the protagonists. This absence can be read as a scathing critique of the everyday urban space, which appears liberal at the surface but is not without caste and gender limitations and biases at the deeper levels. It can also be read as a deliberate exclusion on the author’s part to highlight the scanty representation of Dalit women in society and literature.

Navaria’s protagonists explore through their experiences the networks of caste in the age of globalisation in the space of the modern city that they inhabit. In this context, Gopal Guru notes, “For the dalits, modernity is seen in the context of their being provided the language of rights to equality, freedom and dignity, self-respect and recognition” (123). However, the aspect of alienation also attaches itself to modernity. Even though the city promises the Dalits freedom, the characters in Navaria’s anthology feel disconnected and alienated in the face of modernity. Navaria’s fiction, as Gajarawala observes, “works within the modernist trope of individual agency and alienation” (*Untouchable Fictions* 158).

It becomes difficult for Dalits to come to terms with their identity because the trauma of generational humiliation based on one’s caste leads to a concealment of the same so as to evade the risk of it happening again in the anonymous existence of the precarious subject. The act of concealment challenges “basic notions of self and self-determination” (Gajarawala “Dragging caste” 151). Humiliation works in complex ways, damaging the self-respect of individuals and furthering the concretisation of old hierarchies. Grounded in the notion of untouchability, the Dalit body is made a site of humiliation even though this very body is exploited for its labour. The strong dogma and divide of purity and pollution that set Dalits apart physically by the operations of touching and not touching create a sense of disembodiment. Within this framework, V. Geetha locates the Dalit body as a disembodied entity, made to suffer “a state of permanent dissociation” (97) in the social setting dictated by caste. When the disembodied Dalit moves to the urban space, the question of inhabitation is further complicated. By inhabiting the city, the ideal thought is that he/she might be able to inhabit his/her body. However, the urban space presents itself as a challenging locale where Dalits are caught in the angst of city life and have to learn to negotiate their identity in this space while simultaneously existing in a fractured sense of the self. The theories on humiliation commonly perceive it as an assault on the sense and dignity of the self.

And when these, what Sanjay Palshikar calls “unwelcome assaults” (80) on the self, are normalised in the everyday, the performance of caste concealment provides protection to the self.

In the stories, the characters who have made their way out of the casteist space of the village suffer from psychological traumas of their past. In the story “Scream,” the cityscape and a Dalit inhabiting that cityscape unfold in the most intricate of manners. The protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the story, only acquires a new name, Tyson, towards the end when his profession demands it. In acquiring a new name, he also acquires a new identity. While he is subjected to racist and casteist attacks on his facial features by his teacher in the university space, which is supposed to be liberal and progressive, he takes that shame and views it in a new light in the world outside the university. He fashions himself as someone whose “ugliness” makes him “differently beautiful,” and he finds power in being sexualised by the ‘upper’ caste women, by their “ogling” with a “lustful hatred” (Navaria 163-164). Later on, with an increase in demand for his services by women who desired his body, he views this ugliness as “the sharpest weapon” and a “beauty unmatched” (Navaria 179). He is consumed by his traumatic past of sexual abuse and a feeling of revenge, which finds its outlet in the city’s complexities. In his everyday encounter with clients, who are mostly older married women, he is constantly taken back to the moment of his past, his trauma of getting raped by the Patel’s (an ‘upper’ caste) son Vinayak in the village. Even though his clients are mostly, married women, his first encounter is with a male client, which throws him into the snares of sex work and also leads to a strong resurfacing of his trauma. In the figure of the male massage client, Pillai, who hints at sexual indulgence with Tyson in exchange for money, Tyson is reminded of Vinayak. However, here he realises that “labor had many meanings” and that the “very thing that made [him] want to die back in the village was considered ‘work’ here” (Navaria 171). The first thought that occurs to him after realising the value of labour in the city is he could take revenge on Vinayak by becoming financially strong.

The protagonist’s former name is not mentioned anywhere in the story. In doing so, the narrative furthers the concealing strategy in a society where a person’s caste is determined by his/her surname. This strategy of not revealing the protagonist’s name is also followed in the story “New Custom.” In these two stories, while this strategy of concealing names resonates with the concealing of one’s caste in the city’s anonymity, it largely reflects the appearance that economic mobility in urban space carries: that of dissolution of identities on the basis of social markers. However, in the fictional narrative of “Scream,” the idea of concealment is complicated by providing an alternate view through the protagonist’s perspective. He refrains from concealing his caste or passing as an ‘upper’ caste using a brahmin surname, as is suggested by his brahmin friend, who works as a waiter. His friend suggests that doing that would change all his characteristics like his “colour,” “ugliness,” “behaviour,” and “language.” But the protagonist refuses this suggestion and questions whether having a brahmin surname masked his friend’s poverty. Instead of passing as an ‘upper’ caste, the protagonist “saw more purpose in being a rich untouchable than a poor brahmin” with a determined will to strengthen his own people with the power of money and education (Navaria 181).

Caste passing also entails, as Gajarawala suggests, “the philosophical problem ... of authenticity” that puts the individual in a precarious position and under an ethical burden (“Dragging Caste” 156-157). This is also reflected in Tyson’s refusal to conceal his caste in a casual conversation with his female friends. The city where “no one asked about anyone else’s caste” (Navaria 166) unfolds the hidden presence of caste in close quarters. His female friend, who belonged to the brahmin caste, when offhandedly asserts her caste identity in a conversation (an undefeatable habit within the casteist framework) the protagonist is rendered silent and is put on his toes, facing a psychological dissonance for something that does not even occur: “My mind started racing to think of what I would say. I couldn’t say I was brahmin — this carried the danger of being caught. Patel? I had the height for it. No, it wasn’t right to hide my identity ... I prepared

myself mentally but she didn't ask me anything" (Navaria 168). Even though he decides against hiding his identity, the apprehension of revelation does not escape him. While the narrative strategy aims towards concealment, the content points the reader in another direction. This split in the strategy and the content can be read as a reflection of the psychological fissure of a Dalit in the urban, the dilemma of concealing one's identity, or rather being forced to do so owing to the casteist nature of society, and of asserting one's selfhood. This heteroglossia in the narrative, the colliding of differing views through the form and content as well as within the content, among characters, is "arguably made even more intense by the more condensed format of the short story form" (Giffard-Foret 6).

The trauma of the past keeps recurring in his everyday encounters with clients and other people, where the instances of their "screams," either due to orgasms or due to violence on their personhood, takes him back to his screaming in the past. It is, however, in the last moments of his life that this trauma finds a prominent presence without any resolution. The moment when he is shot, he remembers the crime meted out on his body and conscience and ultimately poses a question on justice that remains unanswered. The conflict in the narrative and the revenge that the protagonist aims for against Vinayak is not resolved in the end — "This was a fight ... couldn't be concluded ... but for Vinayak's crime ... can the entire community be punished ... would this be justice? ... But our caste ... why are we lowly? How will our people become strong? Where will we go? What should we do" (Navaria 191)? In these reflections, the narrative crosses the spatiotemporal boundaries, where the traumatic memory from his past life resurfaces through traces in the everyday occurring and leads the protagonist to the lingering question of the future of his people and of the affect of caste that create a dead end, a lack of conclusion. This lack of conclusion probably finds expression most profoundly only in the genre of the short story, resonating with the complex manifestations of caste in the urban space, leaving the character and the readers in tension. The repetition of the opening lines of the story at the end captures the essence of recurrence, making the story cyclic, leaving the conflict unresolved, highlighting the never-ending, everyday occurrence of caste and humiliation, and the crime and revenge that emerge from it.

Similarly, in the story "Subcontinent," Navaria's play with time and memory takes the protagonist Siddharth back to the traumatic moments of his childhood where he witnesses the caste violence on his father, grandfather, and Amma, for the simple reason that they dared to wear nice clothes. The flashbacks also take him back to the incident where he was violently hit for resisting the custom of the village, which did not permit a Dalit groom to ride a horse on his wedding day. The narrative expands on these moments that trigger the affectivity of shame and fear in Siddharth. In the ordinariness, through mundane observations, his thought expands on the ordinary visual of the sky — "a broken piece of sky, quivering in the square of the window, trapped" (Navaria 84). In this expansion on the moment of consciousness, he finds the reflection of the dilemma, the precarity of his self that is free like the sky in the modern world, but at the same time it is also broken and trapped in the everyday encounters with caste that bring in the memories of past, haunting and affecting his present state of being. The wound on Siddharth's scalp symbolises the physical remains of the past, the pain, the humiliation. This wound on the corporeal being leads the way for the readers to witness the atrocities of caste by splattering Siddharth's memory on the corporeality of the text. The story progresses through a physical and psychological shift, from village to city in the present and from city to village in memories of the past. Thus, we again witness a shifting of the two terrains of space in time, brought in through memory in the ordinariness of the present.

In cities, the anxiety of revelation of one's identity, of having to face casteism, lurks in shadows in the form of vile comments and subtle taunts on reservation (provided to the marginalised castes by the Indian Constitution). There is an angst that grips the characters, an

angst that their merit will always be questioned on the pretext of reservation. An excerpt from the story "Subcontinent" highlights this new form of casteism manifested in the terrain of modernity. The protagonist, Siddharth Nirmal, who is an executive in a big government enterprise, says,

In this urban world of utter anonymity, there's happiness all around — unending, eternal. This anonymity forever colours our rainbow dreams. But here in the familiar world, there are the same snakes. The same whispers, the same poison-laden smiles. Our 'quota is fixed'. I got promoted only because of the quota... that's it. Otherwise... otherwise, maybe I'm still dirty. Still lowborn. (Navaria 100)

The metaphor of "savage wolves" used to describe the 'upper' castes and the caste violence that they perpetrate in villages return in the shape of "snakes" in cities. There is no conflict resolution in this story, as well. Haunted by the past moments of humiliation, which are triggered by mundane occurrences and by a wedding invite to the village in the present, Siddharth decides to secure his future by carrying along a revolver in self-defence. Even though he attempts to take determined action in the future, the narrative offers no resolution in the present. It ends abruptly, highlighting a necessity, almost a plea in Siddharth's words — "If we don't go, we'll die" (Navaria 103) and leaves the readers resonating with his partner's astonished and confused reaction.

The rules in the village do not allow Dalits to ride a horse during weddings or wear nice clothes. The rules demand their subjugation and prevent them from acquiring 'upper' caste habits and indulging in their performance. This is precisely because when Dalits pass as 'upper' castes, the very result of this act questions the notions of superiority and merit of their caste. In not abiding by the rules, Dalits feel liberated even though their liberation comes at the cost of violence on their persons. However, this dismissal of norms creates a fear within the dominant caste, a fear of revelation, that it is only by indulging in certain performances, by hoarding the resources and labour of Dalits, that they have acquired the status of being 'superior'. Then, the questions that can be posed are: who exactly is concealing, what is being concealed, and how is this concealment to be viewed in comparison to the situationally forceful acts of caste concealment of Dalits. Thus, these stories "throw into relief the ways in which the allegedly inherent qualities or 'merit' of the privileged castes — what makes them savarna, 'golden', 'good', or 'splendid people' as they are known in several vernaculars," reveal that these are just performances that lie at the core of a caste society, "performances that can be persuasively emulated by anyone with sufficient resources and a canny eye for style" (Satyanarayana and Lee 15).

Whereas in the village, the rules do not allow Dalits to wear nice clothes, in cities, the unsaid expectation is that Dalits do not indulge in caste concealment and passing as an 'upper' caste so as to prevent the shock that comes with their revelation. It is as if it is their ethical responsibility not to hurt the sentiments of caste-Hindus and to not cheat them by hiding their caste identity. This is evident prominently in the story "New Custom." This story begins with the "man's nostril ... blasted by stench" (Navaria 66), through the sensory soon enters into the realm of a familiar unknown where the man, pondering on the consumer culture of the modern world, is dragged into the traditional fold by the caste laden reference "darbar" (a respectful greeting reserved for the 'upper' caste) by which he is addressed as by a tea vendor. Just like in "Scream," the protagonist is not addressed by his name. He is a "man" who takes the role of a "darbar," and that role is soon snatched away on the discovery of his caste. What begins as a vague yet rushed encounter soon progresses towards the dimensions of humiliation and discrimination.

Here, the tea vendor feels cheated and is angered at the protagonist for not having announced his caste beforehand. Talking to another person, the vendor says, "it's not as if it's written on someone's forehead who is what. He could have told me from the outset that he had come to Dharma Harijan's place" (Navaria 77). It is because of his "coat and pants," along with his "commanding presence," that the protagonist is mistaken for "a darbar." The protagonist,

however, does not correct the vendor's mistake and plays along. At that moment, he allows himself to indulge in "a social role that the caste system categorically denies to his kind" (Satyanarayana and Lee 10). On realising the protagonist's caste, the attitude of the shopkeeper suddenly changes, and he demands that the protagonist washes his glass before leaving, as it is the custom of the village. When the protagonist questions the shopkeeper about what would have happened had his caste not been revealed, the offended shopkeeper shouts and replies — "If you hadn't said anything, the sin would have been on you" (Navaria 78). This entire scenario reflects how non-Dalits are disturbed by the anonymity provided to the Dalits by city and economic mobility. It is almost lamentable for them to fail to identify Dalits anymore due to the loss of caste markers like attire, language, behaviour, etc. The protagonist's choice of not giving into the "ritual of recognition" becomes a "violation of caste sociality" whereby the hiding of one's caste is seen as ethically and morally wrong, and thus, the one transgressing these unsaid social conducts deserves punishment (Satyanarayana and Lee 14). Through fiction, this ordinary instance of sipping tea at a shop, a moment so mundane that it rejects special attention is picked up by the author to highlight the intrinsic and almost habit-like nature of caste discrimination and humiliation that refuses annihilation even under the weight of urban economic power.

The affectivity of caste comes to the forefront in the analysis of humiliation. Individuals undergo a dual movement in their experiences of shame. Being subjected to enforced visibility, the subject is drawn both towards and away from itself, where ultimately, "the subject may have nowhere to turn" (Ahmed 104). This results in them experiencing a fragmented sense of being, which creates an impossibility of inhabitation as well as escape from the body. Theorising on Dalit testimonial narratives through the lens of affect, Udaya Kumar argues that humiliation "makes visible, without direct presentation" (170) and leads to "complex and paradoxical figurations of the subject" (165). At the same time, the everyday 'escapes' us; humiliation shows the impossibility of escape from the shamed self. The fear of being humiliated leads to the desire for disidentification with the element that shames us. This results in the concealment of caste, which further bears a complex psychological burden on the individual. The self experiences two states of mind constantly; on the one hand, there is the lingering fear of revelation, and on the other hand, there is a questioning of the inability to assert one's identity, which transforms into a deep-seated guilt. Gajarawala labels this as an absurd "philosophical equation" where "authenticity engenders risk, and potential social quarantine, and dissimulation engenders risk of a different sort, and a psychic break" ("Dragging Caste" 150). This 'psychic break' becomes a part of the everyday through the diurnal manifestations of caste in one form or the other.

Subhash Kumar, in the story "Tattoo," tries to conceal his identity by polishing his shoes so as to make them new. In the charm of the metropolis and the snares of capitalism, Subhash tries to confront the fear of discovery of his caste through the two markers — his tattoo (that reads, "Namoh Buddhaya, Jai Bhim" which is a salutation to Lord Buddha and Babasaheb Ambedkar) and his old, discoloured shoes which could reveal his 'Dalitness'. The narrative occurs in the commercialised space of the gym, and it is in such spaces that Subhash is "self-conscious" about his tattoo and pair of shoes. This self-conscious behaviour, where he tries hard to conceal his tattoo and worn-out shoes, is not just about being hardly able to afford membership in this ultimate capitalist space but is also about whether a particular caste is 'allowed' to afford it. The act of going to the gym, which is supposedly an ordinary and regular activity for an inhabitant of the modern city, is complicated in fiction and put in tension by intricately wrapping the layers of fear, anxiety and shame brought in by Subhash's precarious position as a Dalit who is caught in the dilemma of concealment and assertion. One such instance that highlights this dilemma is when he is asked his name by the gym manager, he enters into a conundrum: "'Subhash Kumar...' I wanted to add Paswan, but desisted after a moment's thought" (Navaria 112). Even though he polishes his shoes and hides his identity by trying not to show his tattoo, it's ultimately his habit

that gives him away, the habit of greeting his friend with “Jai Bhim” on a phone call. After his revelation, when he learns that the gym manager Rahul Upadhyay is actually Rahul Valmiki, who had “changed his shoes,” he realises that while the shoes can be fashioned or even changed for new ones, the tattoo cannot be removed. He opines, “but this tattoo? It has seeped, drop by drop, into my consciousness and has permeated my entire being” (Navaria 122). While he slowly comes to accept his shoes and decides to “neither hide them nor be ashamed of them” (Navaria 120), he starts looking at his tattoo in a new light. He does not follow Rahul’s ultimate act of concealment; rather, he views his tattoo that as giving an impetus to his consciousness, and it becomes his consciousness. Subhash’s encounter with Rahul and his identity revelation shows a sense of camaraderie and community that is not commonly found in the city’s anonymity: “‘Sir, you’re a Jai-Bhim-wala too?’ Rahul came closer to me and whispered ... ‘Nice to meet you here.’ I shook his hand” (Navaria 121). These lines exhibit how everyday encounters in the modern social space not only alienate but also bring a shared experience that helps build a collective consciousness. The lines also problematise caste concealment as this camaraderie was possible only because of a chance revelation. As Gajarawala notes, “Passing would also disable the solidarity of community and the activism it engenders ... The tragic element of the subject who passes is a kind of isolation from both the original and its double” (“Dragging Caste” 159).

In both “Tattoo” and “Subcontinent,” the body stands as a witness to the trauma, which is revisited through the marks on the somatic and the psychological. In “Subcontinent,” the forced wound on the body serves as an entry point into caste violence by splattering the protagonist’s memory on the corporeality of the text. Subsequently, in “Tattoo,” the mark on the body stands as a revelation of caste identity in the anonymity of the city, highlighting the complexities of internalised humiliation. In the former, the mark is forced upon the protagonist as an act of violence, whereas the latter only alludes to a simple childhood memory. But this simple memory arrests the protagonist in a self-conscious moment in the present, evoking the affectivity of shame and fear. These markers of caste violence and identity, manifesting themselves in the everyday social and personal, not only evoke the pain and trauma of the past but also foreground the experiences from which the characters derive their agency. Together, these characters claim an unclaimed terrain in the finely woven intricacies of meaning, identity, and space.

S. Anand notes in his introduction to the anthology, “An average Hindu, for whom caste is paramount, will start playing detective in almost every social situation” (7). The detective-like nature of caste-Hindus, as represented in the character of the tea vendor, does not allow the concealment to be sustained for long. But it is not just the caste-Hindus; this social habit of being a caste detective is found slithering its way into the Dalit lifestyle as well, as is evident in an instance in “Scream” where the protagonist narrates — “the first question the Mahars asked was whether I was S.C. or S.T. Then they asked my subcaste. And then they turned their backs. But the upper caste boys turned away as soon as they heard I was Scheduled Caste” (Navaria 163). Through these instances, fiction tends to complicate the binaries in the urban setup and pushes us to look beyond these distinctions into deeper intricacies that unfold. Subhash’s assumption about Rahul being an ‘upper’ caste owing to his “fair-skinned face,” “long, sharp nose,” and wealth, and similarly, his assumptions about other gym members’ castes based on their features, also hint at this ‘detective-like’ nature. However, this curiosity emerges not from a sense of superiority of Dalits but from a conscious and precarious sense of self that hinges on the edge, fearing the moment when they’ll be directly questioned about their caste. Nevertheless, for navigating the everyday-ness of the urban, even with the impossibility of escaping humiliation, the precarious self draws a sense of power from the stability provided by economic capital. Therefore, the characters in these stories are driven towards accumulating more power in the economic space to try and counter the humiliation in social spaces.

All the narratives build on a particular moment or moments in everyday life that captures the effects of caste-based humiliation and put them into tension, which is made possible by the compressed form of a short story. It is this aspect of focusing on “the momentary, the singular, and the revelatory” that the short story as a genre permits the tension in which the plenitude of a novel dissolves (Rizq 80). By focusing and expanding on a moment, the short story captures “the way in which we experience and know the world: occasionally, in fragments” (qtd. in Rizq 80). The limited narrative space where the plot is not developed in its entirety leads to an ambiguity created by a lack of resolution and further creates increased tension where the subject is put in a stressed position. These aspects capture the essence of passing in the everyday where the everyday as mundane recurrence and the ordinary recurrent experiences of an individual’s life resonate with the recurrence of caste and everyday humiliation.

While the genre of the novel might tend to distil these tensions and arrested moments owing to its discursive nature, poetry is removed from the everyday as a genre in the sense that poetry often tends to bring out something extraordinary from the ordinary, risking an aestheticisation of the everyday-ness. This demand for extraordinary poetry has also been criticised, so drawing watertight categories is never fruitful. While poetry is aestheticised and romanticised in its search for the extraordinary, it can also be free flowing in its treatment of the everyday. For instance, as Epstein puts it, “in both its form and content,” poetry can become an “ambitious allegory of everyday life” (740). But even after various evolutions in poetic forms, the demand for poetry to address something exceptional lingers on. Prose, however, is free of such preconceived notions. Therefore, it can be argued that the genre of short stories addresses the concept of caste concealment and humiliation in the most intricate and intense manner.

In Navaria’s stories, the intricacies have been addressed to the fullest. There is a desire for existence, for inhabiting a space in relation to others, which brings in the complexities of wearing specific habits for caste concealment everyday. The everyday becomes a reminder that “Life is perhaps nothing more than a prop to go on living” (Navaria 179). It is this act of living that drives one towards various performances to ensure one’s survival in whatever way one can, meeting the demands of the modern urban space that carries at its heart the residues of caste. Fiction plays a major role in cracking open the closed lid of mainstream literature and analysing the ‘habits’, the prosaic, the ordinary, and the everyday social experiences through a Dalit perspective and articulation. These stories question the very ethics of everyday articulations in a casteist order of things and claim an unclaimed terrain in the modern world and literature.

Note

¹ The term has been borrowed from the concept of ‘passing’, which is generally used in the African American context and was popularised by Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*. In the South Asian context, ‘passing’ has been equated with caste concealment by writers like K. Satyanarayan, Joel Lee, and Toral Jatin Gajrawala, among others.

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