

The Ethics of Representation: Can The Upper-Caste Author Speak For The Dalit?

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Abstract- This paper explores the ethical implications of upper-caste authors attempting to represent Dalit experiences in literature. It critically examines whether upper-caste writers can authentically speak for Dalits, or if their depictions are limited by their own caste-based positionality. Drawing from a review of key literary works, including those by Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy, this study analyzes the potential for misrepresentation in these narratives, particularly in their portrayal of Dalit characters as passive victims. The paper engages with key concepts from postcolonial and cultural theory, including Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, to highlight the challenges of representing marginalized voices through the lens of privilege. Further, it discusses the role of upper-caste authors as allies, suggesting that while they may support Dalit voices, their role should be one of amplification rather than appropriation. The paper concludes by asserting that upper-caste authors cannot ethically speak for Dalits due to inherent limitations of their perspective, and calls for greater self-representation by Dalit authors. The need for more inclusive and ethical literary practices is emphasized to ensure that marginalized communities' voices are not overshadowed.

Keywords- Dalit literature, representation, upper-caste authors, ethical concerns, power dynamics, authenticity, allyship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Topic:

The question of who can authentically represent marginalized communities, particularly the Dalit community in India, is a crucial issue in literature. Historically labeled "Untouchables," Dalits have faced systemic oppression and social exclusion due to their caste. Their experiences have often been ignored or misrepresented in mainstream discourse. As a result, literature has played a key role in shaping public perceptions of Dalits, either reinforcing stereotypes or, less frequently, offering more nuanced portrayals of their struggles.

Central to this debate is the question of authorship: can an upper-caste writer genuinely represent Dalit experiences? This ethical dilemma has sparked ongoing debate in literary studies, as it challenges whether an upper-caste author, with their own privileges and limited understanding of Dalit oppression, can ethically represent the Dalit voice. It raises questions about power dynamics, cultural appropriation, and the limits of empathy in art.

Research Question and Objective:

The central research question guiding this study is: "**Can the upper-caste author ethically speak for the Dalit?**" This question addresses a crucial issue in the ethics of literary representation. It asks whether an upper-caste author, who occupies a position of privilege, has the moral or ethical right to speak on behalf of a group whose life experiences are rooted in exclusion, violence, and oppression.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Literary Context of Dalit Representation

Dalit literature emerged post-independence as a response to centuries of caste-based oppression, gaining momentum in the 1960s, influenced by the Dalit Panthers and Ambedkar's social justice vision. This literature sought to challenge upper-caste narratives and assert Dalit dignity. Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* highlights Dalit consciousness and the need for literature reflecting their lived experiences. Early representations of Dalits by upper-caste authors, like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), often portrayed them through pity or exoticism, reinforcing stereotypes. Anand's protagonist, Bakha, suffers under an upper-caste lens, presenting social issues but lacking Dalit-authored depth. The gap between upper-caste depictions and Dalit realities underscores the necessity for authentic Dalit voices.

Theories of Representation

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques Western depictions of Eastern societies as exotic, justifying colonial domination. This idea resonates with caste representation, reflecting how literature perpetuates hegemonic power dynamics. Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) explores the complexities of representing marginalized voices. Spivak argues that even when subalterns speak, their voices are often misrepresented, relevant when discussing Dalit representation by upper-caste authors. This raises ethical concerns about authenticity and the potential for misrepresentation.

The Dalit Perspective

Dalit literature offers a counter-narrative to mainstream traditions, documenting caste-based discrimination. Autobiographies like Babytai Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* provide intimate accounts of Dalit challenges, particularly for women, asserting resistance against Dalit history erasure. Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* uses humor and satire to assert cultural pride and challenge caste narratives. Dalit literature not only tells stories but reclaims agency and asserts humanity.

Caste, Power, and Writing

Caste and literature intersect with power dynamics shaping whose voices are heard. Upper-caste authors, despite their prominence, often lack the lived experience to authentically represent Dalits, raising ethical concerns about authenticity and agency. The dominance of upper-caste narratives in literary canon formation has marginalized Dalit voices. Studies show that Indian Writing in English (IWE) is dominated by upper-caste authors, sidelining Dalit literature's historical significance. This exclusion highlights the need for a more inclusive literary landscape. In conclusion, Dalit representation in literature, especially by upper-caste authors, demands critical examination to ensure ethical and authentic portrayal.

III. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

Voice and Authenticity

A key ethical issue in representing Dalits by upper-caste authors is authenticity. Can an upper-caste writer genuinely capture a Dalit's voice, or is it an act of appropriation? Authenticity in literature involves accurate portrayal and agency. For Dalits, their voice in literature is a tool to reclaim identity and resist oppression. However, upper-

caste authors, despite empathy or a desire for social change, are separated from the lived realities of caste-based discrimination and exploitation. Their portrayals are inevitably influenced by their own social privileges, risking misrepresentation or oversimplification of Dalit experiences. This often reduces Dalit lives to stereotypes or romanticized victimhood, distorting their reality for the benefit of the privileged. Gayatri Spivak's idea of the subaltern suggests that marginalized voices are often mediated by dominant discourses, making it difficult for Dalits to speak for themselves. Upper-caste authors may unintentionally control the narrative, denying Dalits the chance to represent themselves.

Power Dynamics in Writing

The power dynamics in writing about marginalized communities like Dalits are significant. Historically, upper-caste individuals have dominated the literary space, shaping narratives and reinforcing caste-based stereotypes. This control has led to Dalits being portrayed as objects of sympathy rather than autonomous individuals. The exclusion of Dalit authors further perpetuates this power imbalance, distorting Dalit representations. Upper-caste dominance in shaping literary canons influences how caste issues are framed, often benefiting the privileged.

Ethical Concerns

The ethical issues in representing Dalits by upper-caste authors are complex. By assuming the Dalit voice, upper-caste authors risk overshadowing authentic Dalit perspectives, which are essential for narrative integrity. This marginalizes Dalit voices, trivializing their struggles. Additionally, portraying Dalits as perpetual victims reinforces harmful stereotypes, ignoring their diversity and resilience. Such representations can influence public perception, perpetuating biases that prevent true understanding of Dalit communities. Authentic representation by Dalit authors can challenge these biases and contribute to social change.

In conclusion, the ethical implications of representing Dalits by upper-caste authors intersect with power, authenticity, and social justice. The potential for misrepresentation underscores the need for inclusive, ethically responsible literary practices that respect the agency of marginalized communities.

IV. CASE STUDIES OF UPPER-CASTE AUTHORS AND DALIT REPRESENTATION

Examine Specific Works

Several upper-caste authors have written about Dalit characters, contributing to the discourse on caste and representation. Authors like Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, and others offer perspectives on how upper-caste writers approach Dalit portrayal.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) is one of the earliest attempts to explore Dalit life. The novel follows Bakha, a Dalit boy facing discrimination and violence. While Anand's work highlights caste oppression, it risks portraying Dalits as passive victims, not fully reflecting their agency or resistance.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) includes Dalit characters like Velutha, who challenges caste structures but ends tragically. Critics argue that focusing on Velutha's victimization may reinforce stereotypes of the suffering Dalit, rather than exploring his complexity or agency.

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) introduces a marginal Dalit character, Maan. Though the novel critiques caste oppression, it fails to delve into the emotional and cultural depths of Dalit characters. While these authors raise awareness, they often miss Dalit empowerment and agency.

Analysis of Representation

Upper-caste authors aim to expose Dalit oppression but face challenges in avoiding stereotypes. Their works risk reducing Dalit characters to symbols of suffering, lacking depth and agency. Anand's *Untouchable* shows Bakha's passivity, which can undermine the portrayal of Dalit resistance. Roy focuses on Velutha's tragic end, reinforcing the narrative of failure for Dalits trying to break free. Despite their critical stance, these authors often limit Dalit agency and fail to capture the full complexity of Dalit life.

Dalit Response to Upper-Caste Representation

Dalit writers, such as Bama in *Karukku* (1992), criticize the romanticization of Dalit experiences. Bama presents Dalits as resilient and complex, focusing on both external oppression and internalized caste prejudice. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) offers an authentic critique of upper-caste representation, presenting Dalit life with emotional intensity and highlighting their agency.

Dalit critics argue that upper-caste authors, despite noble intentions, fail to understand caste oppression fully. Their works often focus too much on victimhood, neglecting Dalit power, resistance, and agency.

In conclusion, while upper-caste authors have highlighted Dalit struggles, their works often fail to offer ethical, authentic representations. Dalit responses emphasize the importance of self-representation and the need for more nuanced portrayals of Dalit life in literature.

V. CAN AN UPPER-CASTE AUTHOR SPEAK FOR THE DALIT?

Exploring the Limits of Representation

The question of whether upper-caste authors can authentically represent Dalit experiences delves into the limitations imposed by their own positionality. In literature, representation is not only about narrating events or emotions but also about embodying a perspective shaped by lived experiences. Upper-caste authors, despite their intellectual empathy or social activism, are inevitably removed from the direct experience of caste-based oppression, which places inherent constraints on their ability to fully capture the Dalit condition.

While upper-caste authors may possess a strong understanding of the social injustices faced by Dalits, their writing often remains filtered through their own caste identity, which may prevent them from authentically conveying the complexity and nuances of Dalit experiences. Even with the best intentions, these authors may lack the lived understanding of the daily struggles, humiliations, and violence experienced by Dalits, leading to portrayals that are either too generalized or inadvertently romanticized. As Gayatri Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" suggests, even the best-intentioned representation of marginalized voices is often filtered through the lens of the dominant group, diluting the authenticity of the narrative (Spivak, 1988).

The upper-caste author, regardless of their empathy, will always be limited by their position in the social hierarchy. They may attempt to narrate the Dalit experience, but this will remain constrained by their own worldview, values, and understanding, which are shaped by privilege and power. This raises the ethical concern of whether they can ever truly speak for the Dalit or merely represent their own interpretations of Dalit struggles, thus distorting the lived realities of the community.

The Role of Allyship

While the task of representing marginalized communities like Dalits may be inherently problematic for upper-caste authors, there is room for these authors to play a supportive role as allies. Rather than attempting to speak for

Dalits, upper-caste authors could amplify Dalit voices by creating space for Dalit authors to share their stories and experiences. In this role, upper-caste writers can serve as advocates who facilitate access to platforms, resources, and audiences that Dalit writers might otherwise struggle to reach due to systemic caste-based discrimination in the literary world (Roy, 1997).

However, the challenge remains in how upper-caste authors approach allyship. While their support is crucial, there is a fine line between offering genuine support and overshadowing or co-opting Dalit voices. If upper-caste authors attempt to be the central voice in the conversation about caste, they risk once again positioning themselves as the primary narrators of Dalit life, which defeats the purpose of allyship. True allyship requires self-awareness and a willingness to take a backseat, allowing Dalit voices to lead the conversation (Anand, 1935).

Moreover, it is essential for upper-caste authors to avoid paternalism in their allyship. The role of the ally should not be about rescuing Dalits or assuming the mantle of their struggles but rather standing in solidarity, acknowledging their privilege, and amplifying the voices of those who have long been silenced (Spivak, 1988).

Implications of Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation of Dalit lives in literature can have far-reaching consequences, both within the literary sphere and in society at large. Literature plays a key role in shaping public perceptions, and when Dalits are inaccurately or stereotypically portrayed, these distortions can reinforce harmful caste-based prejudices and deepen social divides. When Dalit characters are reduced to symbols of victimhood or suffering, it risks overlooking their humanity and complexity. This kind of portrayal reinforces the societal perception that Dalits are passive and incapable of agency, perpetuating their marginalization (Limbale, 1996).

Misrepresentation can also contribute to the erasure of Dalit histories, cultures, and achievements. By failing to portray Dalits as active agents in their own lives, literature overlooks the rich traditions, resistance movements, and contributions that Dalit communities have made to Indian society. Additionally, the ethical implications of misrepresentation extend beyond literature into broader cultural and political realms. Distorted portrayals may perpetuate stereotypes that affect real-world interactions, influencing how Dalits are treated in education, employment, and social settings (Valmiki, 2003).

VI. CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

The exploration of the ethical implications of upper-caste authors attempting to represent Dalit experiences has revealed several critical insights. First, the literature review and ethical analysis underscore the inherent limitations of upper-caste authors when it comes to authentically representing Dalit voices. These limitations are largely due to the authors' positionality within the caste hierarchy, which shapes their perspectives and often distorts their depictions of Dalit life. While upper-caste authors like Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy have attempted to highlight the plight of Dalits in their works, their representations are often filtered through their own experiences and socio-political backgrounds, which are disconnected from the actual lived realities of Dalits. This disconnect raises questions about the authenticity of their portrayals and whether they inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or reduce Dalit experiences to victimhood.

The case studies of works by Anand and Roy revealed that while they brought attention to caste discrimination, their narratives did not fully capture the complexity, agency, or resilience of Dalit communities. Rather, Dalits were often depicted as passive victims of an unchanging system of oppression, which limits their agency and reinforces existing power imbalances. In contrast, Dalit authors like Omprakash Valmiki and Bama offer more nuanced and authentic representations, emphasizing resistance, self-determination, and the diversity of Dalit experiences.

The ethical analysis also highlighted the significant power dynamics involved in writing about marginalized groups. The dominant role of upper-caste authors in shaping the literary canon has resulted in a marginalization of Dalit voices, further reinforcing the control of the narrative by the privileged class. This power imbalance limits the opportunity for Dalits to speak for themselves, and any attempt by upper-caste writers to represent Dalits without critical awareness risks misrepresentation and perpetuation of caste-based biases.

Final Verdict on the Research Question

The evidence gathered throughout the paper suggests that an upper-caste author can never fully and authentically speak for the Dalit. The limitations imposed by their own caste identity—rooted in social privilege and disconnected from the daily experiences of caste-based oppression—make it nearly impossible for them to represent Dalit experiences with true authenticity. While they may attempt to raise awareness of

Dalit issues and highlight injustices, their portrayal is inherently filtered through their own perspective, and this can distort the reality of Dalit life. Thus, while upper-caste authors may shed light on caste discrimination, they cannot truly capture the nuances of Dalit existence without falling into the trap of misrepresentation or oversimplification.

Implications for Future Writing and Literary Practices

The findings of this paper call for a more inclusive and ethically conscious approach to literary representation. For future writing to be more ethical, upper-caste authors should refrain from attempting to speak for Dalits and instead focus on amplifying Dalit voices. A crucial step in this direction is facilitating platforms where Dalit authors can share their stories, ensuring that their narratives are not filtered through the lens of the privileged class. Upper-caste authors, as allies, can support Dalit writers by promoting their work, offering spaces for Dalit voices to be heard, and ensuring that the literary world becomes a more inclusive space for marginalized communities.

Moreover, literary practices must be reflective of the diversity within Dalit communities. Instead of reducing Dalits to mere victims or suffering subjects, literature should celebrate the richness of Dalit culture, history, and resistance. Ethical representation involves portraying Dalit characters not just as objects of sympathy, but as complex individuals with agency, aspirations, and the power to challenge and transform their circumstances.

Call for Critical Reflection

This study emphasizes the need for ongoing critical reflection on power, voice, and authenticity in literature. It is imperative for writers, scholars, and readers to engage deeply with the ethical considerations involved in representing marginalized communities. The question of who gets to represent whom in literature is central to understanding how power dynamics shape cultural narratives. As literature continues to play a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes, it is crucial that we prioritize the amplification of marginalized voices, allowing those who have been silenced or misrepresented to share their stories on their own terms. In doing so, we can contribute to a more just and equitable literary landscape, where all voices are given the respect and platform they deserve.

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