Chronicle

Chapter-V

Reading What Is Not Said: Caste, Canon, and the Limits of Representation

By

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Abstract

From its early decades to today, Indian English fiction has been read both as a witness to social changes and as a carrier of human values. It has often been praised for creating a space of moral reflection, cultural memory and ethical imagination. Still, one of its most intractable challenges is around caste, its representation, deferment or unspoken nature. This paper takes caste not as a social theme, but as a problem of literary representation as such. It points out that caste often enters Indian English fiction by passing through silence, abstraction and partial articulation, and makes for a comfort in the narrative in spite of structural inequalities having been indeed left intact. Through close readings of selected texts, the chapter examines how caste is variously represented, deferred, or left unspoken in Indian English fiction. While these texts are an admission of caste oppression, often there is the disruptive potential in them through reconciliation and moral appeal. The last part of the paper deals with two texts, Mahasweta Devi's

Draupadi (1997) and Bama's *Karukku* (2000) which shows how caste is articulated in terms of violence, testimony and refusal, and also to confront literary form and readerly expectations. The paper also takes selective but important insights from Ambedkar, Spivak and Gopal Guru, to guide the close readings of the texts. By looking closely at what is left unspoken, it shows why silence and representation matter ethically, suggesting that attentive reading needs to work with narrative conditions which make caste visible, invisible or left unspoken.

Keywords

(*Caste, Indian English Fiction, Silence, Representation, Narrative Comfort, Ethics of Reading*)

Introduction

Indian literature in English has frequently been hailed as a space of moral reflection, cultural memory and ethical imagination. From its early decades to today, Indian English fiction has been read both as witnesses to a social change and as a carrier of human values. Still, perhaps the greatest challenge within this tradition lies less in what is represented than in what is left unsaid. In the literary canon, caste appears neither consistently nor coherently. It is occasionally named, sometimes displaced, and more often left unspoken. This paper begins by attending to that very muteness. Rather than asking why caste does not appear in some texts, it asks a more difficult question of what work does this absence do. Silence here is not considered as a failure of individual writers, or as a simple lack of awareness. Instead, it is

approached as a representational strategy that uncovers the limits of liberal humanist literary traditions in India. Many canonical texts envision social harmony, moral development or national belonging without addressing caste as a material and lived structure of inequality. In doing this they create a kind of narrative comfort in which caste is present as background and absent as a problem.

Reading what is not said therefore calls for a change of method. It has to do with paying attention to narrative atmosphere, ethical abstractions and assumptions that frame literary worlds. This perspective does not intend to question the honesty or integrity of literature. Rather, it recognises that literature, like all other forms of culture, operates in frameworks of ideology, which determines what can be said and what cannot be said. This paper argues that caste in Modern Indian writing operates in different modes of representation. In certain works, caste is left unspoken or transformed into a moral issue while in some others, it is recognized but dealt with by reformist or spiritual frameworks. Finally, in these texts, representation loses its usual form, making way for breaks, refusal, or the power of personal accounts to take its place. Tracing these shifts enables us to understand not only how caste appears in literature, but also how literature explores its own ethical limits. To build this argument, this paper takes a purposefully selective approach in choosing the works. Canonical pieces by R K Narayan and Anita Desai provide the analytical backbone and are read closely for the narrative silences and ethical abstractions. Texts by Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand are transitional figures in which caste is visible, but mediated through nationalist or humanist frameworks. Finally, writings of Mahasweta Devi and Bama

are approached as moments of rupture and refusal which challenge the very conditions of literary representation. The paper does not attempt to provide an exhaustive history of the caste in Indian literature. Instead, it reads a small but significant set of texts in order to demonstrate the operation of silence, visibility and rupture as different representational responses to caste. It thus proposes that the study of literature and caste must attend not only to what is represented, but also what is made invisible under the claims of universality, aesthetic ideals, or moral principles.

Theoretical Framework: A Poetics of Silence and Rupture

This study is grounded in a critical framework that treats caste not as a social theme to be represented, but as a structural problem that tests the ethical limits of literary form. Drawing upon Ambedkar's conception of caste as a system of power rather than a moral failing, Spivak's critique of representation and epistemic violence, and Gopal Guru's analysis of humiliation as a constitutive social experience, the framework reads literature as an ideological field in which visibility, silence, and voice are actively produced. Representation is thus understood not as reflection, but as regulation: a set of narrative strategies that decide what may appear, what must be deferred, and what must remain unspeakable.

Within this perspective, Indian English fiction is analysed along a spectrum of representational positions that move from ethical abstraction to political rupture. The framework rests on four interlinked propositions. First, silence is not absence but a narrative

technique that naturalises hierarchy by converting structure into background. Secondly, mediation through morality, spirituality, and empathy transforms caste from a system into a sentiment, thereby containing its disruptive force. Thirdly, rupture marks the point at which literary form itself fractures under the pressure of violence and humiliation, exposing the limits of ethical universality. Finally, refusal designates those modes of writing in which testimony displaces aesthetics, and experience becomes theory.

Together, these propositions constitute a model of ethical reading that attends not only to what texts say, but to how they manage inequality through form, tone, and omission. The framework positions literature as a site where caste is not merely depicted, but negotiated, deferred, disciplined, or destabilised. In doing so, it offers a critical vocabulary for reading the canon against its comforts, and for recognising silence itself as a decisive act of representation.

Analysis of the Chapter

Canonical Silence and Narrative Constraint

The questions of silence and invisibility come into sharper focus when we turn to canonical works by authors like R K Narayan, Anita Desai, Raja Rao and others. R K Narayan holds a well established place in the canon of Indian English literature. His fictional town of Malgudi has frequently been compared for its warmth, its simplicity and clarity of values. Narayan's writing is widely viewed as non-confrontational, humane and gently ironic. It is precisely this reputation that makes Narayan's one of the most popular works, *The Guide* (1958) a

productive text for reading silence. In Narayan's fiction, caste is not actively denied, but it is never allowed to emerge as an issue. *The Guide* tells the story of Raju, a tourist guide who becomes, through a series of misunderstandings, a spiritual figure. The main transformation Raju experiences throughout the novel is from a manipulator of the world to a reluctant saint, which culminates in his fast for rain and potential death. At one level, the novel has to do with personal growth, moral ambiguity, and the conflict between appearance and reality. At another level, it is a richly textured social world that looks stable, familiar and ethically coherent. What is striking, however, is that this social world is built on the structure of hierarchy without ever calling caste a lived system of inequality. Malgudi is full of priests, traders, temple authorities, villagers and pilgrims. The social roles are also clearly demarcated but caste is not named. The absence is not a coincidence. It enables the novel to envisage social order without social conflict.

Narayan's narrative voice contributes significantly to this effect through its calm and unjudgmental tone. Characters are introduced with their flaws and their virtues intact and moral dilemmas are presented as individual rather than structural. The male protagonist, Raju's failings are not social but personal. His redemption, correspondingly, is individual. The acceptance of him by the community as a spiritual guide is neither questioned in terms of power and authority. Instead it is to be treated as a curious, but natural development. This method of telling is similar to the warning Ambedkar gave that trying to correct individual hearts without challenging the systems of power that make them so is a fundamental

error. In Annihilation of Caste, Ambedkar insists that ethical appeals and spiritual reform can not destroy caste because caste is not just a problem of moral conscience but it is a system of social relations (Ambedkar, 1936). Narayan's novel, though ethically sensitive, works precisely at this level of morality. It imagines goodness, suffering and redemption without questioning the social structures in which they occur. The temple in *The Guide* is one very revealing site. Temples in Indian society are heavily intertwined with caste practices such as access, authority and ritual hierarchy. In Narayan's novel however, the temple is not the space of social exclusion, but the site of spiritual continuity. The rituals are smooth, the authority is not questioned and there is no conflict. This aestheticisation of religious life enables the novel to remove the spiritual from the social inequality.

Caste thus becomes part of the background of the novel rather than the thematic concern. It exists as an organising principle even though it is never explicitly named and it is this quiet absence that gives the silence its power. By not bringing caste into the foreground, the novel offers readers to live in a world where hierarchy is natural and unproblematic. The ethical comfort of the narrative is based on this refusal. This does not mean that Narayan is unaware of social differences. Rather, his choices in the narrative are a larger liberal humanist impulse that focused on shared humanity rather than on structural critique. Characters are judged based on kindness, sincerity and moral development. Social injustice is converted to personal limitation. As a result caste as a lived experience of humiliation, exclusion and inherited inequality vanishes from sight. Former Professor and political scientist, Gopal Guru makes a distinction between abstract

suffering and live humiliation and states that caste cannot be understood without paying attention to the everyday experiences of degradation that it generates (Guru, 2009). There is suffering in *The Guide*, but no humiliation. Raju suffers inside, mentally, morally but he is never degraded due to caste. This absence reinforces the ethical universality of the novel, but at the same time it masks the social asymmetry. The ending of *The Guide* only reinforces this narrative comfort. Raju's fast is seen by the villagers as a spiritual act that may rain. When Raju tells Velan, "It is raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs," (Narayan, 1938, p. 256) the statement carries less the certainty of rain than the comfort of faith. Whether or not the rain comes is left ambiguous. What is more important is the moral transformation of the protagonist. The faith of the community in Raju is depicted as genuine and common. There is no questioning of who gets to become a saint, to confer authority or whose bodies bear the burden of belief. Social consequences of spiritual authority are still untouched upon. From the point of view of representation, this ending points out the limits of the ethical imagination of the novel. By focusing on the redemption of the individual, it avoids the issues of social responsibility. Caste, once again, lies outside the frame of the narrative.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions against speaking for the subaltern in ways that eliminate their particular history and material conditions (Spivak, 1988). In Narayan's novel, the subaltern does not even speak. Silence becomes the management of narrative. The lack of caste assures that there is no subaltern voice which would disturb the moral coherence of the story. This silence is not in any obvious

way violent. It is gentle, convincing and profoundly canonical. Of course, that is the reason why it is effective. It teaches its readers to equate good literature with moral universality and emotional balance, and equate structural inequality with extraneous to literary value. Reading *The Guide* for what it does not say therefore reveals how the Indian literary canon has often dealt with caste not through denial but ethical abstraction. Caste is never condemned or confronted. It is irrelevant to the moral universe of the narrative rather than being explicitly denied. This strategy achieves a strong sense of normalcy, but leverages the limitations of representation. Narayan's novel thus comes to play as an important starting point for this paper, not because it is uniquely silent, but because it represents an example of a dominant mode of canonical writing. By finding ethical meaning not in social structure but in individual transformation, *The Guide* gives us a vision of humanity that is comforting, coherent, and incomplete.

If R K Narayan's *The Guide* makes caste invisible by moral universality, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) provides a more complicated representational strategy. Here, silence does not function through social normalcy but through a different kind of intense focus of interiority, memory, and emotional life. Desai's novel is concerned deeply with time, family relationships and the lingering effects of Partition. Suffering is all around in the text, but caste is nowhere to be seen as a named social reality. *Clear Light of Day* is set in Old Delhi and is focused on the Das family, and in particular on the strained relationship between two sisters, Bim and Tara. The story jumps back and forth from the past to the present and shows us emotional wounds, resentments, and moments of care which are part of family life. What

makes the novel particularly compelling is the depth and sensitivity of its psychological insight. Characters are drawn sensitivity and inner conflicts are addressed as if they were significant morally. However, this inward turn causes a particular type of abstraction. Social realities like caste, class and labour get diffused into the private sphere of feeling. The world outside the family enters the narrative, but is not introduced as a structural force; rather it is a background noise in the family narrative. Even Partition, one of the most violent social ruptures in Indian history, is remembered in terms of personal loss and not collective trauma. This focus on interior life makes Desai part of a liberal humanist tradition that values the truth of one's emotions over the analysis of society. Pain is universalised and made legible by personal relationships rather than social location. As a result, caste vanishes not because of it being denied, but because it is made irrelevant to the ethical work of the novel. The household itself becomes a closed moral universe. Servants are mentioned from time to time, but their lives are marginal to the story. They help to facilitate domestic routine and do not disrupt it. Their social positions are not interrogated, and their voices are not heard. This choice in narration reinforces a hierarchy of attention, in which certain forms of suffering are worthy of exploration, and others are outside the frame. The critique of social reform given by Ambedkar is very relevant in this perspective. Ambedkar suggests that we as a society substitute emotional sympathy for structural change. Indian society mistakes morality for social justice (Ambedkar, 1936). In the case of *Clear Light of Day,* there is an abundance of emotional sensitivity, but

nothing of the structural critique. The novel teaches the readers how to feel deeply but not how to see inequality.

The language of memory is another contribution to this abstraction. The past is brought back to give us a place of reconciliation and understanding. Bim's eventual acceptance of her family's failures is pictured as a moral victory. Forgiveness is made the highest form of ethics. She perceives the shared past and familial bonds not as confinement but as fertile ground for future relationships:

> With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences - not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (Desai, 1980, p. 182)

However, this reconciliation takes place within the family altogether and social hierarchies are left alone. Caste in this context is not a source of conflict or a subject of memory. Its lack makes it possible for the novel to envision a moral universe in which emotional resolution replaces social change. This doesn't affect Desai's literary achievement but it does reveal the limit of representation. The novel is

ethically clear because of a narrowing of social vision. What Desai's work reveals, therefore, is not silence as normality, as in Narayan, but silence as ethical perfection. Caste is quietly set aside under the weight of psychological depth and social inequality is mediated through feeling and emotion, indicating a shift in the canon from the unspoken social order toward a focus on the inner life of characters.

The Discomfort of Mediation Representation

If Narayan and Desai stand for two dimensions of silence, the change towards partial visibility is marked in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). Caste exists in this novel, given a name and recognized, but it is carefully controlled in a framework of spiritual nationalism. *Kanthapura* is the story of a South Indian village transformed by Gandhian nationalism. The freedom struggle makes a way to village life through religion, myth and collective action. Unlike *The Guide* or *Clear Light of Day*, *Kanthapura* presents a clear reference to caste divisions. Brahmins, pariah, sudras and other social groups are well specified. Untouchability is mentioned and caste discrimination is accepted as a social problem. On the surface, this looks like a more representational and visible deal with caste. However, the representational strategy employed in the novel neutralises the caste conflict by subordinating it under Gandhian ethics. Caste makes sense as a moral issue to be solved through spiritual reform, not a system of structure and power. The theme is of unity, sacrifice and national awakening. Social antagonism is mellowed down in the name of collective struggle. The village goddess, Kenchamma and the figure of Gandhi blend in the narrative imagination. Myth and politics

intertwine, and effect a sacred frame for resistance. Within this frame caste oppression is recognized but never allowed to break the moral unity of the community. Moorthy, the Gandhian leader, advocated equality and inclusion but the deeper structures of caste hierarchy are not demolished.

Ambedkar was very critical of this Gandhian way. He said that it was an emphasis on moral reform and harmony of the village which concealed the realities of caste domination and maintained Brahminical authority under the pretense of spirituality (Ambedkar, 1936). *Kanthapura* is an example of such a tension. While the novel does speak against untouchability, it does not question the village as a place of entrenched hierarchy. The narrative voice is important in this regard. The story is narrated by Achakka, an old Brahmin lady whose point of view is the moral center of the novel. Her voice is loving, communal and deeply traditional. This choice gives the novel authenticity, but it also restricts the critical reach of the novel. Caste is sifted through the consciousness of Brahmin that seeks harmony rather than confrontation. Caste thus becomes visible but manageable. It is recognised as wrong, but the criticism of it is postponed in the name of national unity. The freedom struggle offers a better moral horizon to assimilate social conflict. Resistance goes out, against colonial power, not inward, against caste hierarchy. From the point of its representational character, *Kanthapura* holds an important transition position. It does not simultaneously silence caste completely and nor does it allow it to destabilise the ethical frame of the narrative. Instead, it presents a model of reformist representation, in which visibility is not necessarily structuralized-critically.

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable,* published in 1935, goes one step further to visibility. Unlike the earlier texts discussed, *Untouchable* has caste at the centre of the story. The novel deals with one day in the life of a little sweeper boy called Bakha and exposes the humiliations Bakha suffers because of his untouchability. Caste, in this novel, is named, condemned and represented in detail. At first glance, *Untouchable* is the answer to the problem of silence. The novel directly challenges the caste and also gets the reader's emotions. Anand's prose is graphic and Bakha's agony is depicted with intensity. The reader is invited to sympathise very much with the protagonist. But, the representational strategy of the novel imposes another limitation. The suffering of Bakha is individualised. Caste oppression is felt through one body, one consciousness. Structural analysis gives in to emotional identification. The reader is asked not to understand caste as a systemic force in any way but to feel for Bakha. This humanist approach is one of power and constraint. On the one hand, it makes caste visible and morally urgent; on the other, it runs the risk of including caste in the ambit of empathy. Bakha is transformed into a person of pathos instead of political agency. His plight requires pity, not system change. Of particular revelation is the ending of the novel. Solutions to caste oppression are an imagined realization brought about by external intervention such as the flush toilet or Gandhian reform. Bakha himself remains passive; torn between hope and confusion. Ambedkar's insistence that caste cannot be done away with through the process of reform is relevant in this respect alone. For Ambedkar, technological or even moral fixes are not possible against a system based on social power (Ambedkar, 1936). Gopal Guru's

contribution on humiliation further makes the stakes clearer. Caste humiliation is not only an emotional pain but a socially constructed condition to the process of identity and agency, says Guru (2009). In *Untouchable*, humiliation is well presented, but its reproduction in structure is not fully drawn. The novel shows suffering but does not politicise it. In spite of this, *Untouchable* plays an important transitional role. It shows that visibility is not enough to solve the problem of the limits of representation. Even when the naming and denouncing of caste takes place, literature will sometimes find it difficult to imagine the possibility of collective resistance or structural transformation.

Navigating the Road to Rupture

The above discussion on some of the well known canonical Indian English Fictions has shown the ways in which caste is dealt with in the realm of literary representation using silence, abstraction, spirituality and empathy. Each approach represents a departure from silence, yet at the same time a certain level of containment. If caste cannot be adequately represented through such methods, we need to ask what happens when the representation itself starts to break down, and what forms of writing arise when literature refuses to provide comfort, unity and moral resolution. This shift can be seen in the work of Mahasweta Devi and Bama whose writings do not work towards managing caste but rather try to disrupt the very conditions of caste representation. It is not that silence brings clarity in their works, but rather they initiate rupture and refusal. In the short story *Draupadi* (1978) by Mahasweta Devi, representation itself starts to be fractured because the narrative

does not even try to reconcile suffering with ethical universality. Rather than softening oppression through emotional appeal, the story lays bare the constraints of language, narrative, and moral resolution.

Draupadi tells the story of Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman who is involved in armed resistance against the state. She is taken to jail, tortured and raped by the security forces. The story builds up to a moment that rejects narrative closure. Dopdi fights her oppressors not with words and pleas, but with her violated body. She rejects clothing, she rejects shame and she rejects the terms under which power expects submission. Unlike the previous texts discussed, *Draupadi* does not apologize for violence or make it psychological growth. Violence is brutal, excessive and unaddressed. The body becomes the location of the failure of representation. Language cannot encompass what has occurred and moral structures crumble under the pressure of state sanctioned brutality. This is a decisive shift. Caste, class and power are no longer mediated through ethical comfort. Instead, they are exposed in the 'epistemic violence' of representation itself (Spivak, 1988). Dopdi cannot be spoken for. Her resistance does not take the form of speech which can be assimilated into narrative coherence. It takes the form of refusal. The story's ending is crucial. When Dopdi stands naked in front of Senanayak, the officer in charge, she turns the logic of power on its head. Her body with its marks of violence becomes unreadable in the dominant discourse. The shame no longer belongs to her. The authority of the state is momentarily unsettled, not through reform or appeals to empathy, but through sheer exposure. This moment stands apart from the strategies of Anand or Rao. There is no appeal to humanist sympathy, no spiritual consolation, and no promise

of reform. Instead, *Draupadi* argues that certain kinds of suffering are unredeemable on existing ethical principles. Representation here does not heal, it wounds. From the caste and marginality standpoint, this rupture is important. The tribal body in Dopdi is not abstracted and individualised into moral symbolism. It is still political, material and undeniably potent. The story makes readers confront the violence that underwrites the power of States and social order. Mahasweta Devi's writing thus becomes a point where literature ceases to deal with caste and marginality but enables them to destabilise the representation itself. The reader is left disturbed, ethically implicated and without closure. This discomfort is not an inadequacy of the text. It is its political force.

While *Draupadi* is a rupture, Bama's *Karukku,* first published in Tamil in 1992, is a profound refusal of silence and mediation as well as aesthetic distance. *Karukku* does not seek to gain entry into the canon on its terms. It puts into question the very assumptions that canonical value is constructed upon. Written in the form of an autobiographical narrative, *Karukku* is a story about Bama's own life as a Dalit Christian woman growing up in Tamil Nadu. The text documents the humiliations and exclusions and internalised violence of caste as it is played out in everyday life. Unlike previous writings, *Karukku* does not metaphorically or morally translate the suffering. It mentions caste explicitly and often. Language plays an important role here. Bama writes in a direct, conversational style that is resistant to literary ornamentation. There is movement between memory, reflection, and testimony throughout the text. This way of writing rejects the division between lived experience and literary form. The narrative here is not

written for aesthetic enjoyment. It is shaped by urgency. Gopal Guru argues that the humiliation of caste is not incidental but constitutive to Dalit subjectivity in a caste society (Guru, 2009). *Karukku* makes this visible. Humiliation is not only in the acts of violence, but in gestures, institutional practices, and religious spaces of everyday life. What makes the difference between *Karukku* and *Untouchable* is agency. Bama does not invite pity. She asserts voice. The story is not looking for validation from upper caste people. Instead, it speaks from the inside out of Dalit experience, speaking to the issues of internalised oppression and external domination.

Religion, which is the spiritual shelter in *Kanthapura* and the abstraction of morality in *The Guide*, becomes the place of betrayal in *Karukku*. The Church reproduces the caste hierarchies instead of dismantling them. This exposure disrupts reformist discourses that assume the inherently liberatory nature of spirituality. From a representational perspective *Karukku* rejects the ethics of containment. It does not convert suffering into forgiveness and reconciliation. Anger remains present. Memory remains unresolved. The text requires not emotional sympathy, but structural change. Spivak's caution to speak for the subaltern is partially answered here. *Karukku* is not spoken for. It speaks. And in doing this, redefines what constitutes literature. Testimony becomes theory. And experience turns into critique.

Implications of the Study

The present study carries implications that extend beyond the specific corpus of Indian English fiction it examines, touching upon questions of canon formation, ethical reading practices, and the responsibilities

of literary criticism in a caste-stratified society. First, it unsettles the long-standing assumption that the moral universality of literature is itself an ethical achievement. By demonstrating how silence, abstraction, and reformist mediation often function as narrative comforts, the study suggests that ethical coherence in canonical writing may be secured at the cost of social opacity. This invites a reconsideration of how "human values" have been historically defined in Indian literary discourse, and whose experiences have been rendered peripheral in the process.

Secondly, the study implies a methodological shift in literary analysis. Reading caste not only as a theme but as a problem of representation foregrounds the necessity of attending to narrative atmosphere, tonal choices, focalisation, and omissions as sites of ideological work. Such an approach moves criticism away from a binary of presence and absence, towards a more precise account of how visibility is produced, deferred, or neutralised. In this sense, the study contributes to a mode of reading that treats silence not as an interpretative gap to be filled, but as an active structuring force that shapes ethical meaning.

Thirdly, the trajectory traced from canonical abstraction to rupture and refusal has consequences for how the Indian literary canon itself is to be re-evaluated. The study does not propose a simple replacement of one set of texts with another. Rather, it implies that canonical value must be rethought in relation to representational risk. Texts such as *Draupadi* and *Karukku* show that literary significance may lie not in harmony, closure, or aesthetic balance, but in the capacity to disturb inherited forms, to strain language, and to refuse reconciliation where

reconciliation itself becomes complicit. This has implications for pedagogy and curriculum design, where questions of form, voice, and ethical disturbance must be treated as central rather than supplementary.

Fourthly, the study bears directly on debates about empathy and moral identification in literature. By showing the limits of humanist sympathy in texts like *Untouchable*, it implies that emotional response, while necessary, is insufficient as an ethical ground. Without a sustained attention to structure, empathy risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to contest. This has wider implications for how suffering is represented and consumed in literary cultures, and how readers are positioned in relation to marginalized lives.

Finally, the study suggests that the ethics of reading is inseparable from the politics of representation. To read what is not said is not merely a technical exercise; it is an ethical demand placed upon criticism itself. Such a practice compels readers and scholars to interrogate their own comfort, to question the universality they inherit, and to recognise the ways in which literary form participates in the maintenance or disruption of social hierarchies. In this sense, the study implies that literature cannot be treated as a neutral witness to caste, nor criticism as a detached observer. Both are implicated in the ongoing negotiation between visibility and erasure, between ethical imagination and social structure.

Conclusion

When read together, the texts that have been discussed in this paper

reveal a trajectory of representation. In *The Guide*, Narayan makes caste invisible by moral universality. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* abstracts social inequality into psychological exploration. Rao's *Kanthapura* recognises caste but it is subsumed in spiritual nationalism. Anand's *Untouchable* reveals caste by way of empathy, yet has it within individual suffering. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* breaks representation by means of violence and Bama's *Karukku* refuses mediation completely. This is not linear progress. It is a series of negotiations with the restriction of representation. Each text approaches caste in a different way shaped by the historical moment, ideological commitments and aesthetic choices. What comes out of that, however, is not so much a single solution, but rather a growing awareness of the ethical constraints of literature. Ambedkar's insistence on caste as a structural system and not a moral flaw goes against literary traditions that prioritise harmony, empathy or spirituality. Literature that fails to take into account this structure runs the risk of replicating inequality even when attempting to humanise suffering (Ambedkar, 1936). At the same time, this paper is not attempting to say that silence or abstraction are acts of bad faith. Rather, it implies that these strategies are a reflection on the comfort zones of the canon. Reading what is not said enables us to grasp the way in which literature is involved in the creation of social imagination, often by limiting the scope of visibility.

Thus, caste in modern Indian writing can not be understood on simple lines of presence or absence. Instead, it needs to be read with the representational strategies that determine what literature can and cannot say. Silence, abstraction, reformist visibility, rupture, and

refusal are not an aesthetic choice. They are ethical positions. An ethical practice is therefore reading what is not said. It urges readers to pay attention to narrative comfort, to interrogate universality, and to acknowledge whose experiences are made unimportant in the name of literary merit. Such reading does not detract from literature. It deepens it. As Indian literary studies continue to broaden their canon and their methods, it is a mode of reading that is becoming of urgent necessity. The act of representing is inseparable from attention to social structures and an acknowledgment of ethical stakes. Literature may not dismantle caste on its own, but it can refuse to present it as natural or inevitable. It can unsettle comfort and reveal its limits. In these moments of disruption, silence often becomes the most powerful voice.

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