

Rethinking Crip Caste through Disability, Embodiment, and Form in Contemporary Dalit Women's Writing

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Abstract - This article suggests a critical framework for the reading of contemporary Dalit women's writing in India called "crip caste" which views disability as an interrelated concept with its complementary category, caste-gender. The prior studies on Dalit women's autobiography and fiction have been focused predominantly on the intersections of caste and gender, and have adopted intersectional feminist standpoint theory to look at the double burden of caste and gender, reading the forms of embodiment in pain, exhaustion, malnutrition, injury to labour, injury to reproduction and injury to the psyche that saturate these texts as sociological phenomena rather than formal aesthetic phenomena. It brings to the fore crip theory (Alison Kafer, Sami Schalk, Robert McRuer), debility-capacity (Jasbir Puar) and Dalit feminist standpoint (Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru), via the works of Bama's Sangati, Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life, Ants Among Elephants by Sujatha Gidla, and Coming Out as Dalit by Yashica Dutt, as well as recent poetry by Meena Kandasamy and Challapalli Swaroopa Rani. The writer makes three claims in the article: First, that caste is not only a disabling structure that creates 'slow death' among Dalit communities, but also a structure that creates 'slow death' of the debilitated body minds of Dalit women writers; Two, that Dalit writers have invented special forms of narrative including episodic structure, collective voice, sensory memory and refusal of bildungsroman closure to register debilitated body minds which are not objects of pity; and Three, that reading these texts through crip caste opens new directions for Dalit studies and disability studies, both of which have not fully theorized the intersection of these. This research provides the basis for a discussion of the implications for method in the postcolonial disability humanities in the conclusion.

Key Words: Dalit women's writing, crip theory, disability studies, intersectionality, debility, embodiment, Indian English literature, postcolonial disability humanities

1. INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A CRIP CASTE FRAMEWORK

On the road in Sangati, Dalit nameless woman, Bama's, carries the head-loads of the construction material and is found to be pregnant and losing the foetus in a fortnight. The Weave of My Life is a story by Urmila Pawar in which the mother of the author weaves her way to the point where her blood runs cold and her eyes roll out of her sockets. In Ants Among Elephants, Sujatha Gidla's grandmother walks until her legs swell, her eczema sores never heal. These are not only expressions of grief, but they are also structuring of the event of the modern Indian woman's autobiographical and fictional

writing. However, the dominant critical interpretations of such moments have been read as moments of caste atrocity, moments of gendered violence, moments of feminist standpoints, and the bodies in pain, the bodies that fail, the bodies that adapt, persist and refuse have not been read as disability-theoretical bodies.

The article suggests studying contemporary Dalit women's writing within the framework of the system of debility as well as social hierarchy to which it belongs, this system allocating debility across population, and through modes the crip theorists have come to understand. While the neologism is certainly in reference to Robert McRuer's "crip theory" and the recent work by Sami B. Schalk and Jina B. Kim on race-disability interface, it also suggests that there is a language of caste and that it cannot be translated out of Anglo-American concepts.

It has an argument of 5 points. The second section explores the scholarship which has developed around Dalit women's writing, and the absence of an analytic – disability. The theoretical framework is introduced in third section by juxtaposing crip theory, debility studies and Dalit feminist standpoint. The third of four sections examines close readings of the selected primary corpus organized in terms of three formal devices, which become characteristic means of representing embodiment of the crip caste, episodic narrative structure, collective voice as a voice to the individual voice and sensory-affective memory. In a gesture that takes the argument beyond prose, this section on Dalit women's poetry in the present day looks at the situation that exists today. The end note is a reflection of methodological stakes of postcolonial disability humanities, and literary studies of India in general.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE DISABILITY-SHAPED GAP IN DALIT WOMEN'S STUDIES

Since the late 1990s, there have been three approaches to the Dalit women's writing. The first axis is the autobiographical-testimonial axis extended by the work of Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, by Shravankumar Limbale and later extended by Untouchable Fictions, by Toral Jatin Gajjarwala, who have challenged the upper caste norms of literature by the Dalit story. The second is the feminist standpoint axis which is the most theorised through feminist standpoint approach propounded by Sharmila Rege in Writing Caste/Writing Gender and it involves Dalit women's testimonios, which leads to feminist standpoint different from upper caste feminism and Dalit men's politics (Rege). The third one is a comparative-international shift, newer and which brings Dalit writing into a dialogue with African American writing, Indigenous or global Black writing (Bose; Yengde).

In all three axes, the voices of the Dalit women were heard but not as 'disability'. Rege's depictions of physical fatigue are the experiences of oppression and oppression of the caste-

gender. Gajarawala discusses the "broken body" in Dalit realism and elucidates the same in the context of an aesthetics of testimony. Teresa Hubel's recent recovery of swearing and obscene language in Bama's *Sangati* is a body-centric recovery that goes through feminist sexuality rather than disability (Hubel). In this case, Dalit somatic memory did not, as in the other cases, write the body into a disabled body in relation to crip theory, but rather as archive of caste as Aniruddha Kar has recently argued.

While there is a significant body of literature on disability within Indian contexts (Anita Ghai's *Rethinking Disability in India*, Renu Addlakha's edited volume *Disability Studies in India*, and Nilika Mehrotra's ethnography) this scholarship has largely focused on policy, rehabilitation and the medical-legal machinery, with relatively little sustained engagement with literary texts and almost no sustained engagements with the intersection of caste and disability (Ghai; Addlakha; Mehrotra). However, less attention has been paid to the importation of the international disability humanities turn, which has attracted scholars like Tobin Siebers, Alison Kafer, Robert McRuer, and Sami Schalk, and crip theory has tended to develop its anti-racist and anti-colonial arguments in dialogue with African American and Indigenous studies, rather than with caste studies (Siebers; Kafer; McRuer; Schalk).

Two recent interventions start to fill this gap. The 'disabled untouchable' as mentioned in colonial era texts has been discussed in Shilpa Anand's essay on disability and caste (2019, 2022) which states that the caste is a disabling structure as it is produced by colonial era texts. And Nandini Ghosh's book *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice* allows for the possibility of conceptualizing crip-caste analysis without the word (Ghosh). This does not introduce the notion of disability in addition to caste and gender; it is not a debate about whether or not Dalit women suffer the same disability as caste women, rather it is a recognition of that fact by the Dalit women's writing for quite some time now.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRIP THEORY, DEBILITY, AND CASTE

3.1 Crip Theory and Compulsory Able-Bodiedness

For almost 20 years, the theoretical lexicon that has informed anglophone disability humanities has been launched by Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability (2006) authored by Robert McRuer. As with Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality", that is, the critique and understanding of dominant cultural norms as they relate to sexual conformity, the concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness" has been used to critique and understand dominant cultural norms as they relate to bodily conformity (McRuer). This was further developed in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) which proposes a "political/relational" model of disability, which assumes able-bodiedness as its structure of futurity (Kafer). In 2018, Sami Schalk combined the two fields, crip theory and black feminist speculative fiction, into one, and showed that one doesn't exist without the other in books, such as *Octavia Butler* (Schalk).

Dalit studies in relation to crip theory come with three arguments. It's first against the medical model of disability, which sees disabilities as signs of a malfunctioning body, and reads the structures that produce bodily inability. Second, it presents the notion that ability and disability are not static forms, but instead are discursive, working and architectural constructs.

Third—and most importantly for this article—and most recently, crip theorists have insisted that production of disability is racialized, gendered and class stratified, thereby making it possible, if not necessary, to extend it to caste.

3.2 Jasbir Puar and the Debility-Capacity Framework

Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability by Jasbir Puar is a book in disability studies for the postcolonial and global context. In the liberal disability rights discourse, Puar argues, attention is paid to the issue of recognition instead of the construction of the "debilitated" population by states and economic systems which are not always fully able-bodied or even recognizable as disabled in the legal-medical sense. In Puar, it is the decay of bodies over time, as structural violence takes its toll: a migrant whose joint is injured after working for ten years on construction sites; an agricultural worker whose lungs have been damaged by pesticides; a woman who has multiple babies without healthcare and finds her reproductive system damaged. These are not "disabled persons," that is, disabled persons who never are able-bodied persons.

Puar's framework is in tune with Dalit experiences. In most rural and urban poor India, the caste system is an incapacitating system that produces manual scavengers, brick kiln workers, leather workers, agricultural labourers and house workers – all of which are predictable forms of work that leads to predictable damage to the body, which the state does not notice nor compensate for. The concept of "slow death" (Berlant) that refers to the "attrition of populations" by chronic work-related illnesses and poor health care provides a complementary lexicon. While Bama's description of women working during pregnancy, and Pawar's of mothers with bamboo splinters in their eyes, is not about "women with disabilities" but about debilitated lives within crip caste.

3.3 Dalit Feminist Standpoint and Embodied Knowledge

Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Anupama Rao and, more recently, Shailaja Paik are Dalit feminist standpoint theorists, who have theorized the epistemic perspective that Dalit women have that is impossible for mainstream Indian feminism to attain. (Rege; Guru; Rao; Paik) The intersections that seem most promising to me between this theory and crip theory are its emphasis on embodiment: Dalit feminist theory has long been concerned with the body as the site of caste, but crip theory has yet to have a sustained body of language theorizing the cumulative effects of embodiment on the body. The vocabulary that I suggest for crip caste respects the standpoint claim.

4. READING THE CORPUS: FORM AND CRIP CASTE EMBODIMENT

4.1 Episodic Structure and the Refusal of Bildungsroman Closure

In *Sangati* (1994) Bama brings together a series of loosely connected stories on the women of a Tamil Paraiyar community that was translated into English in 2005. No one's growth is being followed by the reader, nothing develops towards selfhood. For some, this episodic narrative is an attack on the male bildungsroman, while for others, it is an intentional attempt on the part of the author to recognize the communal more than the individual (Pandian; Ravikumar). I would like to suggest a third reading; the episodic form is a crip form. It

documents an area where the linear progression of a person's life is continually interrupted and mended, is broken and repaired, and when it's done there's nothing to repair. The episodic organisation is akin to the rhythm of feeble lives.

There is some episodic refusal (Dutt) in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019), a bildungsroman, packaged for an Anglophone middle-class audience. Often Dutt's story will hang, will stall, will stop on a place of psychological collapse (depression, anxiety, dissociation) on which the story cannot go. It is its disruptions that make it high moments, its erasures, its chapters in which Dutt can't write, can't remember, can't be the protagonist and success-story the genre needs her to be. These passages seem to have meant when interpreted with the prism of crip caste because the archetypal psychological toll of passing.

4.2 Collective Voice and the Distributed Body mind

The *Weave of My Life* (Aaydan) published in Marathi in 2003 and in English in 2008, is an autobiographical piece, albeit with the first-person "we" and "they" of her mother, grandmother, the sisters and the neighbours (Pawar). Likewise, in another sense what Schalk calls a "distributed body mind" is a non-body mind subjectivity, one that exists in different bodies, communities. It's a crip caste distribution. When the voice of the individual body is small, voices will be broken up and each body will not be able to carry the whole voice.

Don't take into consideration this form device and add the implications of the camera obscura. The Western disability rights frame cannot hold the dispersed body mind which demands to be recognised and accommodated as individual. Pawar's writing is no mere story about one disabled woman it's a community which has been shored up over time. Is not read at all, unless it's read as disability rights on an individual level. One reads it through the prism of crip caste and realises that it is a theory about a formal innovation, not about the person, it's about the kin-network.

4.3 Sensory Memory and the Archive of Pain

It's a family memoir over generations: *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla is olfactory, tactile, aural and gustatory: leather work, the feel of red soil, the sound of a beating, the taste of hunger (Gidla). These sensory elements are not ambience, but rather an 'archive of pain' (Christina Sharpe) as Sharpe puts it elsewhere. In the context of crip caste these are sensory passages, from which debility is documented, as the place. The bodies that can't speak their pain in propositional language speak in propositional language that's preserved in Gidla's prose: the body of smell, taste and touch.

This approach is much more heavily used in Bama's *Karukku* (1992; English 2000). The image of *Karukku* (serration of the leaf of the palmyra) is used as a metaphor for the senses, as a metaphor of the cuts made in the body, cumulation (Bama). Not one wound but a series of micro-wounds which create a weak body mind over time. It's a picture of a kind that's a caste par excellence.

5. EXTENDING THE ARGUMENT: RECENT DALIT WOMEN'S POETRY

In her poetry collections (*Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010) and in her novel-poems *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and *When I Hit You* (2017)), Meena Kandasamy has moved the crip caste analytic to more distinctively poetic and literary forms. Her work is an anticlastic break from the redemptive arc that is

required of anglophone trauma writing. No healing of the speakers of her poems. At times they do live, but this is not a triumph, but a life that is deadened and maimed. A formal feature is refusal of redemption while a crip feature is a caste feature.

Analysis (Swaroop Rani) is extended by the Telugu poems of Challapalli Swaroopa Rani offered in selected English translation. Her Dalit women's reproductive labour poems are a poem on the end of the body, the eroding of many pregnancies, the unknown miscarriage, the body learning to endure pain, it is the norm. In the sphere of the formal innovation (short lines, repeated images, refusals of metaphor), Swaroopa Rani's work is like a poetic approach, Pawar's work is like a technique of the memoir, a performance of a distribution of debility across the language.

Newer poets like Pradnya Daya Pawar, Hira Bansode, and the authors of the anthology, *Holy Skin and Other Appearances*, are more aware of and conscious of crip caste poetics than the earlier ones (Bansode; Pawar, Pradnya). These poems do not cure or break the body into a hero, but only weaken the body, as Puar describes it; the body is not sentimental in these poems.

6. CONCLUSION: METHODOLOGICAL STAKES

In this article, I have argued that reading Dalit women's writing requires the ongoing dialogue with Dalit feminist standpoint, crip theory and debility studies, and that the latter is an ongoing, formally innovative means of engaging with crip caste, or the production of debilitated body minds within caste structures. There are three implications:

CR is not the alternative to the existing interpretation(s) of Dalit literary studies but instead is a complement and expansion of them. It is true that the political and the formal are not two distinct questions, but one question at two different levels, as I've attempted to show. These are not only literary techniques: the episodic form is a political thesis, as is the collective voice, as is the sensory-affective archive.

Second, disability studies: crip caste challenges the anglophone hegemony and raises the question of caste, colonialism and the specific institutional structures and discourses of postcolonial employment that produce disability. Caste must be a key and not an ancillary category of transnational disability humanities as scholars such as Clare Barker and Stuart Murray have called for (Barker and Murray).

Thirdly, in terms of postcolonial studies, this embodied turn, which has been a feature of the discipline over the last decade (as seen in the work of Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, etc.) has been present in Dalit women's writing for decades but has not yet been labelled as such— 'theoretical'. Crip caste calls this tradition by name, and introduces it into the discussion as a theory, rather than just a testimony.

However, as regards method, this research suggests that it is crucial to remember the formal innovation of marginalized literatures when conducting empirical studies of them. Readings in sociology are required but not enough to 'work through' the texts. The forms are episodic, distributed, sensory propositions to a telling of debilitated lives. In the future this framework could be applied to Dalit men's writing, Adivasi crip narratives and comparative studies with African American disability writing.

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