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The Subtlety of Caste in Dystopian Literature

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Abstract

This research paper endeavours to interpret two works of Dystopian Literature through the lens of caste and its politics of marginality, while unearthing the unnoticed and subtle presence of the issue of caste in these dystopias, namely Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). This research paper thus aims to offer an alternative way of analysing Dystopian works, specifically through the politics of caste, while rescuing the dystopian literature from the clutches of Western modes of literary interpretation. Placing the Dystopian English literature of the twentieth century within an Indian context of Caste, this research endeavours to bring to light and unearth innovative insights with a focus on the nexus of hierarchy and power in dystopian worlds, and its impact upon the humanity of the marginalised sections within these dystopias. The commonalities between all these texts is the faint yet palpable glimpses of the marginalised groups in each dystopian society, undoubtedly signalling the nuances of caste within these imperfect societies. This intersectionality between caste and dystopia is precisely what this paper endeavours to unravel.

Keywords: Dystopia, Caste-Dystopia, Hierarchy, Division of Labour, Discrimination, Humanity.

Introduction

Dystopian Literature, since time immemorial, has been read through the Euro-centric lens, with its specific focus on the concerns of the white man's problems from the First World. This research paper, however, attempts to interpret these dystopian works through the lens of caste and its politics of marginality, while unearthing the unnoticed and subtle presence of the issue of caste in these dystopias, namely Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). This research paper thus aims to offer an alternative way of analysing Dystopian works, specifically through the politics of caste, while decolonising the dystopian literature from the clutches of Western modes of literary interpretation.

The introduction of the caste angle in these texts opens up new horizons of understanding the texts from a unique perspective. The paper delves into questioning the viability of the patterns of critically assessing Dystopian Literature in a limited manner, while following the tenets of hegemonic ways of reading. Caste, thus, becomes a thematic concern in the Dystopian texts, when looked at from decolonising interpretative viewpoints. Upholding the non-Western narratives, this paper goes beyond the conventional modes of viewing, with its emphasis upon the presence of the disenfranchised, as it reviews as well as critiques the multiple ways of hierarchisation of dystopian societies.

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As represented in several works of Dalit Literature, the life of the Dalit people is no less than a dystopia itself, as seen in *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Karruku* (1992) by Bama, and visible even in the realm of Dalit poetry. The citizens of a world where caste politics is conspicuously practiced, that world itself is no less than a dystopia, wherein human beings are graded on the basis of their birth into a particular caste. The denial of basic human rights to the Dalit population is a stark reminder, of how even in a dystopian world, which claims to be a utopia in its own right, the discriminatory practices in different forms are present regardless. In the guise of progress, success and perfection, dystopian works forget the value of humans and their humanity. It is this absence of human rights that quite naturally triggers a caste-based reading of the dystopian texts. The imperfection of these societies from a vantage point of hierarchy and its byproducts in the form of discrimination of several kinds is the central concern of this research paper.

Huxley's *Brave New World* is one of the primary texts which emphasises upon the idea of a hierarchal organisation of society for the attainment of its goals of utopia. The purported

'brave new world' proposed in Huxley's work falls short of courage when it comes to organising its society at an equal level, with an equal chance for everyone. The segregationist policies of the 'non-brave' new world has nothing new about it. The term Huxley uses in his *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) 'scientific caste-system' (14) aptly defines the ethos of his dystopian universe. The extremely categorised society is a world without the diversity of humanity, absorbed in its own sense of solipsism about the production of beings, but not human beings. As the novel informs us, the prepared concoction is put in test tubes, and sent to a factory churning out babies as per their requirement for the functioning of society, which shows a bleak picture of the ones at the lower end of that hierarchy. The categorised arrangement of its population in a strict caste-system resonates with the Indian caste system. The place of a being in the World State cannot be more than what the World Controllers intended it to be, as the scientific Bokanvosky process does not allow for it to happen.

This notion of a pre-decided life in World State is a synonymous with the the caste system in India, wherein the masses are arranged and organised on the basis of their *Jati*, that is their occupation by birth. In Huxley's work, the dystopia emerges at several levels, one of which being from how the upper castes have access to education, can speak different languages and know about refined knowledge systems, in contrast to the lower rungs, who do not have even the choice to have access to similar privileges. The access to the same languages and knowledges is one of the numerous types of discrimination meted out to the lower castes in Huxley's dystopia. The use of only colloquial and functional language for everyday use is emblematic of the denial of the right to education and knowledge beyond their caste permits. The knowledge dished out to them is of a utilitarian kind, where they only know within the permissible limits with the aid of the hypnopædic lessons, while learning during sleep. The issue with the kind of knowledge they can have for themselves is kept separate from the ones imparted to the upper castes. This imposition of a particular knowledge prohibits them from breaking out of the mould designed for them by the controllers of the world.

This inaccessibility vis-a-vis systems of knowledge, even when both the upper and lower castes are restricted in their own unique way by the World Controller, is a problem area in the text, specifically for the lower castes, who do not have an opportunity to even have the intellectual wherewithal to represent their cause. The hierarchised society erases the root cause of the resistance by robbing the lower castes of their ability to think and apply themselves. Restricting the ability to see beyond their horizon is a stark upturning of the notions of agency for the lower castes in Huxley's world. They, at the end, are seen as functioning as machines without any semblance of humanity in them, accomplishing the menial tasks set out as per their caste. The inconsequentiality of the lives of the lower castes in Huxley's text is a clear violation of their rights as human beings, who barely get an opportunity to be human.

The lack of choice, especially for the lower castes, and the dehumanising systems of society in Huxley's alleged 'utopia' ends up being a dystopia of enormous proportions. "The Non-conformers Pause and Say: "There's Gotta Be Something More", an essay by Myron links factory production in Huxley's work to the work standards practice by the Protestants work ethic. She quotes from Lipset's "The Work Ethic, Then and Now" (61-69) and Adriano Tilgher's *Homo*

Faber, while connecting sitting idle and not working with a manifestation of sin. Lipset's and Tilgher's assessment of Martin Luther provides a new perspective on the ethics vis-a-vis work, arguing for how people are put and fit in the positions as is dictated by God. This fixity of their occupational nature is precisely what predominates the concerns in the realm of caste. The imposition of a particular work position is what overturns the discourse of equality and choice, as the choice is not available to the individual due to the restriction in going beyond their allowed work roles, which finally culminates into the uneven status in one's society, exactly like the caste-system. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* is a vivid example and exposition of this case, and more specifically in Chapter 4, titled: "Caste is not just a division of labour, it is a division of labourers" (17). The demarcation of work for a specific kind of labour and labourer is the problem which Ambedkar too points too and is against, as this strict division of work is he calls 'pernicious', which leads to a limited number of choices for individuals belonging to the Dalit section. Ambedkar strikingly comments on how, 'There are many occupations in India which, on account of the fact that they are regarded as degraded by the Hindus, provoke those who are engaged in them to aversion. There is a constant desire to evade and escape from such occupations...' (17). The stigmatisation of certain works or labours, blotting the notion of honour, is the root cause of the social injustice that is meted out to the Dalits who are forced to take up such labours. The absence of choice in the matter is what leads to dissatisfaction amongst the sections of society who are coerced to be a part of an exploitative system, bordering on harassment, physical as well as psychological. Huxley does this division of labour somewhat differently, as the World State robs their denizens of their consciousness, necessary for an uprising, and thus the uprising does not happen for most of the population. Huxley's extremely categorized society speaks volumes about the lack of movement from one caste to the other, as the population is created with a clear intention of predetermining their lives, to the extent of being fatalistic. The absence of any possibility of social change and mobility in which they are born is an outright evidence of the unapologetic forms of forced lives they are made to live and die in without even the realisation that they could have been so much more, had the scientific formula permitted.

This 'frog-in-the-pond' and 'hamster-on-the wheel' kind of life is what is absolutely deplorable about Huxley's new world, which promises nothing new in terms of human rights and humanity, but dishes out a regurgitated pattern of hierarchy and social structure which is blinded by the newer forms of intoxicated living, supported by soma, and other bodily distractions freely provided by the State. The perks offered by the State for non-resistance of the masses to this contrived forms of existence are manifold and far-reaching, and they are a means to an end. The end, of course, is the compliance of the masses to the state's ways, resulting in an unequal distribution of resources and discrimination at multiple levels. The ghettoisation of a certain section of population by compartmentalising them into boxes of being devised for carrying out specific jobs is preposterous about this world. The facade of happiness which never ends does not apply to everyone, otherwise why would the text have any anomalies in this pattern of happiness? Huxley consciously inserts discontent in some characters to hint at the inherent problems with the caste-based scientific systems of existence. The interrogation of the existing conditions initially by

Bernard Marx, then Helmholtz Watson and then finally the Savage, signals at the limitations experienced by them, which infect points out at the contradiction in the discourse of a harmonious and stress-free lives of the denizens of the new world. There however are some abnormalities in an almost perfect world. Bernard Marx, belonging to the Alpha caste, is an anomaly of the system, and is not an Alpha in the traditional sense of the word. There is another anomaly like him Helmholtz Watson, who dares to read forbidden poetry in class. John the Savage is one of the primary catalysts, who though is a product of two upper-caste Londoners, becomes a mouthpiece for the quasi-revolution that occurs in the text.

This ghettoisation of beings does not only restrict itself to language and the knowledge prerogative, but also percolates to down their clothes. The segregationist politics of caste is as blatant as it can be. The imposition of a dress-code upon the citizens screams the caste that they belong to. The easy identification of the citizens on the basis of their sartorial form facilitates the agenda of the state which us to keep people in check, in their respective place and, thus, effectively curtail their mobility. The distinguishing feature of the apparel they are made to wear, again points to the lack of choice in the attire they wear. The sartorial code is sacred and should not be broken by the grey-coded Alphas, purplish or maroon-coded Betas, green-coded Gammas, khaki-beige-coded Deltas and black-coded Epsilons. The attires vocalise the level one occupies in the social hierarchy, all for the benefit of the State to direct the masses as per need without the risk of letting them cohabit and interact with each other, as Mr. Foster remarks, "Hasn't it occurred to you that an Epsilon embryo must have an Epsilon environment as well as an Epsilon heredity?" (30). The question lurking in the corner is how does one go beyond one's caste identity in a world which neatly and almost coercively organises even one's cells, one's corpuscles, one's parts of being?

The solipsistic and self-enclosed universes each category of being is limited to is clearly dictated by the Mr. Foster, the Head of the Department of Conditioning, "We also predestine and condition. We decant our babies as socialized human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage workers or future ..." He was going to say "future World controllers," but correcting himself, said "future Directors of Hatcheries," instead" (*Brave* 29). These lines corroborate with how caste is etched in stone, and it is impossible to break out of it, once you are born in a particular scientific caste as is deemed by the World Controller. The sewage work meant for the Epsilons even though is considered important work, as is said by the Henry Foster, the head, "All men are physico-chemically equal... Besides, even Epsilons perform indispensable services" (113), it does not make their place in the society equal as is visible in the Bokanovsky process used in their creation. The unabashed use of the "magnesium salts, and alcohol for keeping the Deltas and Epsilons small and backward", the regulation of oxygen to affect and restrict brain development as Foster comments, "...the lower the caste... the shorter the oxygen" (30), indeed clarifies the absence of agency these entities suffer from intros world. Their status as non-human beings, especially in Epsilons, as Mr. Foster notes, "we don't need human intelligence" (31) solidifies the proof that the birth of these lower castes is done with a agenda in mind to not let them think about their plight by altogether not injecting any faculty to think in the first place. The invention of these mechanistic beings purely on the basis of their caste is the problem area vis-a-vis the discriminatory politics inherent to caste. This also reflected in

the Elementary Class Consciousness lesson imparted by the Director to the Beta section:

Alpha...work much harder than we do, because they're so frightfully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid... Oh no, I don't want to play with Delta children... And Epsilons are still worse. They're too stupid to be able to read or write..." (*Brave* 49-50).

The confident claims of the beings being equal does not seem to be the case, as in the aforementioned lesson, it is caste-distinction is cleanly demarcated for the Betas, to respect Alphas for their superior intellect, to be satisfied with being a Beta because their brain doesn't have to apply itself, and also they are better than the others below them. The angle of Neo-forms of untouchability is also subtly mentioned with absolutely despising to play with Deltas and Epsilons, as they are inferior in their cerebral capacities. The exclusionist patterns of discrimination and untouchability on various grounds do exist in the text, even when it claims the contrary, as the Controller laughingly explains to John the Savage the impossibility of breaking out the mould of one's caste, "Expecting Deltas to know what liberty is! And now expecting them to understand Othello! My good boy!" (*Brave* 331).

The imposed dress code is also a medium, a ploy through which the World State can keep an eye on any element of society out of its right place. The colour-coded attires is indeed an tool for surveillance, spotting with ease, anything unusual from the routine and modes of hierarchy upon which this society is established. The identification of people on the basis of their clothes is a theme also present in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the black-dressed commanders, the wives in blue, the marthas in green, and the handmaids in red. The colours again symbolise one's the permitted and non-permitted spaces for an individual based on their place on the rungs, higher or lower. The higher the pay grade, the more access one can have to privileges, while lower beings perform the duty as dictated by the Republic of Gilead. The commanders run the state business, the wives are to supervise the domestic front, with marthas to do the kitchen work, and the handmaids to reproduce for them. The clear-cut designation of clothes in its equation with spaces in Atwood is reflected in Huxley's world as well. The clothes in both Huxley's as well as Atwood's works function as as screeching symbols, more so badges of honour for some and dishonour for the others on the basis of what their caste commands them to wear. They speak of one's position on the hierarchal ladder, with spaces clearly defined for a particular category, and non-compliance could lead to serious consequences. Watson is penalised for transgressing rules of the caste he belongs to, as he reads out problematic poetry, and is thus asked to go to the reservation. John the Savage is the exemplary figure for resistance and revolution in quasi-forms, as he challenges the arbitrary division of beings in Huxley's world, that is hardly brave to let humans be humans for once. He speaks for humanity, and the question of freewill that allows room for error, reminding people of their humanity.

The limitation is not there only on the level of the intellect, their clothes, but is also extended to their body. The bodies of the lower caste population are not their own, but are owned by the State. In Huxley's world, the hedonistic ways of the

masses tell a story of sexual liberty and free relations in respective categories, but the diktat of the State to have a polygamous sexual approach is a statement which dissuades the intermingling of one caste with the other, so as to avoid any 'monstrous' outcomes. The sexual choices for the lower castes are limited in numbers, as is also seen in the case of Atwood's work. The handmaids, one of the lowest caste in the Gilead, the 'pariahs' of the society (*Literary Hub*) has no sexuality, as their sexualities are usurped upon by the higher castes in want of a child, the commanders. There is another caste, lower than the handmaids, the *ati-dalits*, the lowest of the lower, in which is the non-child bearing women sent to work in poisonous environments, who are literally sent to die. The exploitation of the handmaids, who are denied any right to their bodies and their sexuality is a glaringly instance of how the body like the mind is under the shackles of the caste-based existence. The grave violation of their human rights, with the commander invading their personal spaces for their divine projects is all what is wrong and unacceptable in Atwood's work. The cross-caste intermingling is prohibited unless it is for the noble purposes of procreation. Offred, the protagonist however, does in her own ways dares to defy the norms of caste by associating with Nick, the alleged Eye in the text. Offred goes against the fears of transgressing the caste rules, which could even mean death, but that does not stop her from resisting.

The enslavement of the handmaids is premised upon the idea of their bodies and reproductive capacities being constricted, with a particular focus on the rigidity in their discomfited approach towards their own bodies. This enforcement of obedience vis-a-vis their bodies culminates eventually into the rebuttal of their human rights to life, to their bodies, to their sense of self and identity permeated with a lack of autonomy in all spheres of life. This enclosed and overbearing kind of limitation upon their existence and the dearth of resources available to them is reminiscent of the Valmiki's *Joothan* wherein one glaringly notices the difference between the accessibility of basic necessities like water, education, sanitation for the lower and the upper castes. Offred, like the other handmaids, is to be put in an enclosure, in a separate room in the house with no room for any distractions, with only a window to her rescue. To be cooped up in a room, have no social identity and life, and be called out and used for higher purposes is representative of the forms of neo-untouchability. The 'outcast' status of the handmaids is conveniently labelled so, to be otherwise exploited for the ulterior motives by the upper castes, which is seen to be openly practiced even in Gilead. This hierarchal pyramid upon which these dystopian societies stand, allegedly 'for their own good', facilitates caste-subjugation and loss of identity due to the constrictions of caste, as is clearly reflected in the aforementioned texts in this research paper.

The theme of ghettoisation continues in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, another example of denying the basic fundamental resources to its people in the name of caste-hierarchy, as the Inner Party members can have access to the resources, otherwise denied to the Outer Party members and proles. The ruling caste and class in all the texts naturally hold the reigns of the power, exerting it over the other lower castes, and in most cases the *savarnas* of Western World are the ultimate deciding authorities laying it out for the masses due to the pedestalized nature of the caste. The proles (the proletariat) are the lowest castes in this pyramid of hierarchy, whom no one cares about, and their opinions do not matter, as if they do not exist. The spatial divisions are also a proof of

the ghettoised idea of where the proles can roam, and where Party members are allowed. Thus, the demarcation of space, with proles unable to infiltrate the sacred spaces of the Party members, is present even in Orwell's dystopia, with the proles purportedly being the lowest in the caste-pyramid. This notion, however, is over-turned by the place of the Outer Party members, as this is a caste which has awareness about their state, unlike the proles who are unaware of everything around them. This awareness of their deplorable state is the cause of misery, seen in the figure of Winston Smith, an official responsible for correcting history. Smith's constant discontent with his position is reflected in his desiring even the life of proles, who can at least be free. The perceived caste-difference in Outer members and proles is visible on paper, but the manner in which Smith and Julia are fed up of compliance to the state policies, nudges them to covet the freedom of the proles. Ironically enough, it is the proles who are freer than the Outer Party members. The caste equation thereby ends up as an inversion of the caste norms, as there is an upturning of the caste roles as per one's place in the hierarchy, as Smith is incensed with the lack of resources even for the party members, tying up their hands to even resist the arbitrary mandates of the Oceania. The equation of autonomy and restriction is reversed in this particular case unlike the other dystopian texts.

To conclude, the theme of caste, although is not visible in a pronounced fashion in Dystopian literature, but the practices of exclusion, discrimination and exploitation resonate with the works dealing with the issue of caste. The harassment, the shame, the stigma the insufferable condition are all commonalities found between the dystopian worlds and the caste-ridden societies. The dehumanisation, rather the reduction of the human being's stature to even below an animal, is emblematic of the miserable state of its citizens within the ambit of both caste and dystopia. The chances of living a fulfilling life as a person, a human being is an impossibility in a dystopia as well as a caste-dystopia, the dystopia that caste-based division entails leads to in society. The caste-dystopias thus are different from an actual literary dystopia in the exaggerated presentation of despair, ennu and dissatisfaction, but the caste-dystopias even when it underplays the extent of despair, even then it more impactful as it borrows from real life and is closer to reality, which thereby makes it more alarming than the fictional dystopias. Both types of dystopias are indictment of the inhumanities intrinsic to their form, and function as a tool to inspire the readers to envisage a world without discriminatory and exclusionary politics, by recognising the humanity of the marginalised and downtrodden castes.

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