

Dalit Autobiographies as Sites of Trauma and Resistance: Analysing *Caste Matters and Water in a Broken Pot*

Sujata Kumari

Master of Arts

Central University of South Bihar

Gaya, Bihar, India

Archana Kumari

Professor of English

Central University of South Bihar

Gaya, Bihar, India

archana@cusb.ac.in

Abstract

Caste-based discrimination is so deeply rooted in Indian society that it affects Dalit communities both socially and psychologically. While existing literature has explored various facets of this discrimination, there remains a gap in analysing contemporary Dalit autobiographies through the lens of cultural trauma theory. This study aims to critically examine Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* and Yogesh Maitreya's *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* to understand how these narratives depict and resist systemic discrimination and oppression. Employing cultural and collective trauma theories, particularly those proposed by Jaffrey C. Alexander and Cathy Caruth, this research analyses these autobiographies to uncover the enduring social and psychological scars inflicted by caste-based discrimination and marginalisation. The study focuses on how these narratives document dehumanisation and silent suffering while simultaneously challenging oppressive caste hierarchies. The findings reveal that both Yengde and Maitreya's works exemplify the dynamics of cultural trauma,

illustrating how collective suffering reshapes community identity and fosters a shared sense of vulnerability. By situating these narratives within trauma theory, the study argues that cultural trauma functions both as a wound and as a catalyst for social and literary resistance. This research offers a fresh contribution to the field by contextualising Dalit subjugation as a normalised social reality in Indian culture. By highlighting the need for equality by sharing Dalit narratives, it aspires to inspire meaningful changes toward a fairer and more equitable society for all.

Keywords: Trauma theory, Cultural Trauma, Caste hierarchy, Dalit narratives, Marginalisation

Introduction

Dalits occupy the lowest status of the caste system in India; their marginalisation causes exclusion and projects the ignominy of so-called untouchability. Dalits are made to experience various forms of violence, discrimination, and subjugation. Etymologically, ‘Dalit’ is a Marathi word, traced by Molesworth in the Marathi-English Dictionary in the 1831 edition and it was later reprinted in 1975. According to the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World by Peter N. Stearns, the meaning of the term ‘Dalit’ is derived from the Sanskrit word which means “broken” or “ground-down.” Towards the end of the 19th century, Jyotirao Phule, a social activist, popularised the term ‘Dalit’ to describe oppressed people. To protect the rights of Dalits, he established the ‘society for the teaching of knowledge’ in 1853. This society focused on educating Dalit students and women. Raj Kumar, in his book *Dalit Literature and Criticism*, elaborates on the term ‘Dalit’. The word *dal* is a vernacular form of the Sanskrit word which means “crack, split, or broken”. (Kumar 3)

Dalits are the people who are subjugated by the upper caste population based on caste hierarchy; this causes cultural trauma. Cultural Trauma deals with frightening experiences undergone by the community, which share similar characteristics, pains, and agony. Trauma Studies were first developed in the 1990s; they aimed to investigate the impact of disruptive

identities on individuals. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer dealt with psychological trauma and wrote *Studies on Hysteria* in 1990, which marked the beginning of trauma theory. Trauma in literature begins with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* in 1996. Dr. Jeffrey C. Alexander explored the idea of 'Cultural Trauma.' He elaborated that

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 12)

The theory of Cultural Trauma can be applied to the Dalit community because the root cause of the anxiety of the entire community is similar. So-called untouchables are considered impure on the basis of their birth; they are ill-treated and are excluded from society. This continuous process of marginalisation made Dalits internalise the humiliations. They have accepted being on the periphery and served the upper caste.

This article titled "Dalit Autobiographies as Sites of Trauma and Resistance Analysing *Caste Matters* and *Water in a Broken Pot*" deals with the cultural trauma undergone by the Dalit community with the reference to select autobiographies titled: *Caste Matters* by Suraj Yengde and *Water in a Broken Pot* by Yogesh Maitreya. Both the Dalit autobiographers portrayed their first-hand experience of incomprehensible violence through their writings. Yengde's *Caste Matters* is his debut publication. The title of the book draws a deliberate parallel with *Race Matters* (1993) by Professor Cornel West who is an American philosopher and public intellectual. Through the title *Caste Matters*, Yengde reflects on how caste affects power dynamics, social hierarchy, and resource distribution. The autobiography centres on the theme of cultural trauma; it projects the anguish of the writer being a Dalit. The opening statement of the *Caste Matters* represents the age-old frustration of Yengde. He asserts: "Let me cut your thick casteist skin with the razor of my rage; That breeding ground of all the things; which were

directed against me....” (*Caste Matters* 42) Yengde conveys a sense of resistance and determination to confront caste-based oppression. From the very beginning statement, the author reflects on the significance of caste which still matters in Indian society. The author metaphorically employs “cutting your thick casteist skin” with “the razor of my rage”, to reflect an intense response to the systematic discrimination imposed on the Dalit community.

Similarly, Yogesh Maitreya in his autobiography *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* reflects his account of struggle, trauma, and resilience. Born into a society that discriminates against so-called untouchables, Maitreya experienced the pain of exclusion, poverty, and systemic oppression. His memoir explores the lasting emotional and psychological wounds imposed by caste-based discrimination. He initiates his autobiography by stating “The world I inherited erased by the world I longed for, nothing remains, but the evidence of me: a soldier, a battlefield, a war.” (1) Throughout the book, he reflects on the isolation and suffering that shaped his identity, as well as the internal battles he fought to overcome them. Through his honest portrayal of the untouchable’s inherited trauma, Maitreya demands the readers confront the truth and acknowledge the struggles of those who are pushed to the margins of society.

Theoretical framework

This study employs close reading and textual analysis of two selected autobiographies *Caste Matters* and *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir* to examine the author’s exposure to trauma and reveal the systematic nature of caste-based oppression. Jeffrey C. Alexander’s theory of Cultural Trauma is applied to highlight the enduring impact of traumatic experiences arising from caste-based social structures. The researcher draws on both primary and secondary sources to collect authentic and comprehensive information on the subject matter.

Cultural Trauma and the Dalit Experience

Cultural trauma refers to the lasting psychological and social impact of historical oppression on a collective group, shaping their identity. Dalit population in India is constantly

exposed to cultural trauma because of the rigid caste-based hierarchy. The rigid caste system has instilled a generational sense of suffering, internalised oppression, and marginalisation. The experience of cultural trauma among Dalits is reinforced through everyday discrimination, from untouchability practices in rural areas to structural barriers in education, employment, and politics. These experiences are carried forward collectively, influencing how Dalit communities perceive themselves and their place in society. Suraj Yengde explores the anxiety of cultural trauma in his book *Caste Matters* and Yogesh Maitreya does the same in his memoir *Water in a Broken Pot*. They articulate the burden of cultural trauma, shedding light on their lived experiences of caste oppression.

Yengde shares his childhood account of trauma, recalling how he accompanied his grandmother to her workplace, where she worked as a maid. As his grandmother attended to her duties, Yengde, still a child, felt the urgent need to use the restroom. However, this put his grandmother in a difficult situation — should she allow him to use the toilet designated for the upper-caste community where she worked? Gathering her courage, she decided to let him go. Their decision, however, was met with disdain and hostility from the house owner who, upon witnessing Yengde using the toilet, erupted in a torrent of offensive remarks. Through his narrative, Yengde reflects on these traumatic memories and the lasting they left on him. Ron Eyerman, in his article, “Social Theory and Trauma” illustrates personal, collective, and cultural trauma. He states that

...trauma at the individual level resembles crisis at the societal level. A crisis, such as severe economic depression, is a shocking occurrence that causes a breakdown in daily routines and exposes at the same time the largely taken-for-granted values that guide them; crisis in this sense reveals to a collective the grounds of its collective identity. (2)

Yengde reflects on his deep humiliation, which left both him and his grandmother feeling debased, underscoring the entrenched caste-based discrimination and the dehumanising treatment of Dalits in society. His narrative exposes the common struggles and systematic oppression experienced by the Dalit community. This shared experience of marginalisation aligns with Erikson's definition of collective trauma, as highlighted by Jaffrey C. Alexander:

By collective trauma... I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared . . . "We" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.

(4)

For Dalits, caste-based discrimination functions as a collective trauma eroding their their sense of dignity, equality, and humanity, and leaving deep and lasting wounds on the entire community. Yengde asserts "I was lesser than the bathroom that was a receptacle of shit." (*Caste Matters* 22) This incident highlights the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy, leaving a lasting imprint on the author's mind. As a result, he emphasises "that is why caste matters."

(22) Expressing his frustration in his autobiography, Yengede opines by asserting that

until radicals make caste their primary project;

until rationalists do not stop commuting to agraharas to educate;

until Dalixploitation becomes a concern of the world;

until Dalit scientists are able to organize;

until Dalit cinema is successful in the project of creativity;

until Dalit rap becomes the lingua franca of revolt and is accepted in the mainstream;
until Dalit achievers are unafraid of revealing their identity for fear of losing their
future;
until #castemustgo is truly embraced and #DalitLivesMatter is in the list of priorities;
until my mother can sleep with reassurance without worrying about her son's
returning home safely in the caste police regime; until then, caste matters. (*Caste
Matters* 39)

With these expressions, the author conveys his suppressed anxiety, pain, frustration, systematic oppression, and trauma. He demands change in the daily struggles of the Dalit community and highlights how their dignity, creativity, and safety are systematically compromised. This is not merely his personal account; rather, it represents the collective suffering of an entire community that has been marginalized and dehumanised for generations. For Dalits, the caste system inflicts cultural trauma by denying them basic rights, silencing their voices, and forcing them to live in fear. Yengde's frustration over issues like lack of recognition for Dalit art, science, and achievement illustrates how these systemic barriers affect the entire Dalit community, preventing them from fully participating in society.

Similarly, in his autobiography *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir*, Yogesh Maitreya metaphorically links the idea of a "broken pot" with a broken identity. Throughout much of the book, he grapples with the search for his identity. He writes:

The more I try to know, the more I am convinced that the story of my family is like that of a broken-pot. Some pieces of it have inevitably gone missing, and without them, this story will never be whole again. (*Water in a Broken Pot* 3)

The analogy of 'broken pot' highlights a fragmented sense of self, where essential elements of their familial history and identity are irretrievably lost. "I know nothing about my grandfather's family, except his father's name..." (3) This sentiment reflects a deep longing

to reconcile the gaps — to unearth the missing pieces that would make the story whole.

Through the title, the author conveys his struggles to grapple with his identity, haunted by the absence of vital connections to his past and heritage.

Trauma extends beyond the personal realm into economic and social spheres. Maitreya examines the deep-seated caste-based discrimination ingrained in Indian society, highlighting systemic oppression that manifests in the nurturing of children, the working conditions of adults, and the lack of equitable opportunities for marginalised groups. The author recalls the conditions, his mother endured while working in a bottle factory. Maitreya recounts:

The factory environment was toxic, in the absence of any safety equipment or health guarantees. I often heard from my mother how women fell unconscious while working. But my mother had no choice. There was only one thing in her sight: our growing, hungry stomach and our needs. (38)

Yengde and Maitreya shed light on the persistent issues surrounding the caste system in India. They recount their childhood experiences as Dalits, describing the trauma of attending the school where they faced humiliation for being unable to pay school fees. By sharing these childhood experiences, the authors illustrate how Dalit children collectively feel neglected — a constant sense of rejection by mainstream society that fosters cultural trauma among Dalit children. Jeffrey C. Alexander, in his book *Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, argues that

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (1)

Cultural trauma emerged as both an empirical, scientific concept and a catalyst for understanding new connections between previously disparate events, structures, perceptions, and actions. This concept also sheds light on a growing realm of social responsibility

construction of social groups, and political engagement. Through the construction of social groups, national societies, and even entire civilisations not only acknowledge the presence and origin of human suffering but also accept a significant degree of responsibility for it. By recognizing the causes of trauma and thereby embracing moral accountability, members of these collectives shape their interconnected relationships in a manner that theoretically enables them to empathise with and share the sufferings of others. Haunted by humiliation, Yengde recalls “I wanted to leave school and join the hustlers in my slum.” (*Caste Matters* 09) For him, attending the local school where all the students of his community studied, was a better option than being humiliated in front of an entire classroom filled with upper-caste students. As a child, Yengde experienced deep trauma exposing the deep-rooted caste hierarchy in which the upper caste enjoyed supreme power and performed the role of lawmakers.

Similarly, Yogesh Maitreya highlights the extreme caste hierarchy followed in many of the Indian schools. He states “The silence in our lives is cruel, violent. And one of the first institutions in India that silences the stories of Dalit community is the school” (*Water in a Broken Pot* 34) Maitreya went to a Brahmin-Baniya school where he learnt ‘Gayatri mantra’. This mandate learning of ‘mantras’ imposed on every stratum of students, irrespective of their caste, community, religion, and class serves to further silence and erase the narratives and identities of marginalised communities, particularly the Dalit community. By mandating the recitation of Sanskrit mantras, schools perpetuate a cultural hegemony that privileges the norms generally followed by the upper-caste community in India; this automatically marginalises other diverse cultures and linguistic identities. This silencing of the Dalit voices within the educational sphere not only reinforces existing power structures but also perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and oppression by denying the Dalits opportunities to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and to assert their own cultural identities.

In the context of religious discrimination, Brahminical ideology often associates purity with the upper caste, while stigmatising Dalits as impure. This discrimination manifests in practices such as refraining Dalits from entering temples or participating in religious ceremonies on equal terms with the upper-caste population. Such exclusion reinforces power dynamics deeply rooted in the caste system, relegating Dalits to subordinate positions. This systemic oppression evokes the feeling of helplessness, anger, and resentment among Dalits. Prolonged experience of inferiority, marginalization and powerlessness contributes to collective trauma within the community, leading to emotional numbing, repetitive behaviours, heightened psychological distress and a deep sense of alienation.

It is evident that the Dalit authors Suraj Yengde and Yogesh Maitreya had a lasting impact on the alienation and humiliation they were exposed to during their childhood. In *Caste Matters*, Yengde recounts the alienation and humiliation he faced, shaped by the systematic denial of Dalit humanity. He writes:

I was forced to adjust within the caricatured stereotype of a Dalit—a violent, undeserving, meritless, criminal being. The strict apartheid based on caste and religion retains absolute sanctity, giving little or no occasion to understand the humanity of the ‘lowly’, ‘polluted’ or ‘unmeritocratic’ Dalit. (Caste Matters 14).

Such narratives illuminate how caste-based exclusion denies Dalits the opportunity to live authentically or pursue their aspirations beyond the professions traditionally assigned to their ancestors. This limitation on career choices, paired with a systematic exclusion, perpetuates a cycle of socio-economic marginalisation and inequality, reinforcing the trauma experienced by Dalits. The narratives of Yengde and Maitreya exemplify the collective alienation of the Dalit community, underscoring how caste-based oppression manifests not only as social and economic inequality but also as a pervasive and enduring cultural trauma. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, who fought for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized communities

in India, in his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, critically examines the hierarchical structures perpetuated by religious doctrines. He asserts that “Religion is a source of power and an instrument of social control... The caste system is a system of graded inequality. It gives the highest status to the Brahmin and the lowest to the Untouchable.” (29)

Suffering in Silence

People dwelling in urban areas assume that casteism is gradually vanishing from Indian society but in reality, it is flourishing even more in some other form. The research article by Tarique Anwar titled “We’re Served Foods Like Dogs: It’s Not Easy to be a Dalit Even in 21st Century India”, provides data on the victimization of Dalits in contemporary India. According to the article, the most recent finding from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the incidents of crime perpetrated against the Scheduled Castes or Dalits throughout India reached a staggering number of over 57,000 cases in the year 2022; averaging approximately, 158 instances daily. The figure reflects a notable escalation of 35% when contrasted with the statistics documented in 2018. The statement of a victim of stern caste-based norms is highlighted in the newspaper:

We often have to tolerate the injustices and remain tight-lipped. What can we do?

We overlook all these things to survive. We have to do everything out of compulsion.

You need to work to earn money. By doing such menial work, we all contribute to managing the expenses somehow. If we object to anything, we won't get work.

(Tarique)

The discrimination faced by the so-called Untouchables in India is a stark reality that permeates their daily lives. Access to necessities like water stored in vessels owned by higher-caste individuals is often restricted for Dalits. Additionally, they are barred from using cots belonging to individuals of higher castes and must seek permission before traversing the agricultural fields of the dominant castes. In the intricate tapestry of Indian society, interactions

between different castes are fraught with barriers. The higher-caste population hesitates to share even the most mundane aspects of life such as food and conversation with Dalits. Caste identity becomes an unavoidable marker, with people often inquiring about one's caste to assign them a social position. The rigid caste divisions are so ingrained that merely knowing someone's residential area can often reveal their caste affiliation. The pervasive discrimination extends to social gatherings and ceremonies, where the upper castes hesitate to sit at the same table or share meals with Dalits. One of the most significant historical challenges faced by Dalits was access to public water sources. In the Mahad Satyagrah of 1927 — a defining movement in the fight against caste oppression — Ambedkar proclaimed in his speech: “We are not going to the Chavdar tank to merely drink its water. We are going to assert that we, too, are human beings like others.” Ambedkar’s leadership in the Mahad Satyagraha was a direct challenge to the caste-based monopoly over water resources.

The plight of the Dalit community is a result of being born into a caste deemed inferior by the upper-caste society, relegating them to a status imposed upon them solely due to their heritage. These persistent instances of discrimination constitute a form of cultural trauma, deeply ingrained in the collective memory of Dalit communities. Such trauma carries an enduring negative impact, not only affecting individuals but also challenging the fundamental cultural and moral fabric of society. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines cultural trauma as “a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society’s existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions.” (*Cultural Trauma and Collected Identity* 55) The experiences of Dalits align with this definition, as the systemic oppression they endure continues to shape their collective identity. Even in the 21st century, the Dalit community continues to struggle to access education, jobs, and social opportunities. This persistent struggle highlights the enduring nature

of caste-based discrimination, which systematically denies the basic rights of Dalits. This refrains them from achieving equality and dignity. The age-old barriers faced by them underscore the urgent need for societal transformation and a collective effort to dysfunction such catastrophic oppression that perpetuates trauma within the Dalit community.

Conclusion

The current study delved into the profound narratives presented in Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* and Yogesh Maitreya's *Water in a Broken Pot: A Memoir*, illustrating how these autobiographies serve as potent trauma narratives that shed light on the cultural trauma endured by the Dalit community. Through their personal accounts, both authors vividly depict the systemic discrimination and oppression that have historically marginalised Dalits, while simultaneously highlighting acts of resilience and resistance. These narratives not only confront entrenched societal norms but also advocate for the recognition and validation of Dalit voices, creativity, and humanity.

By employing Jaffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, this analysis underscores the enduring psychological and social scars inflicted by caste-based hierarchies. Maitreya's memoir, in particular, exposes the hazardous working conditions, economic exploitation, and persistent marginalization faced by Dalit families, emphasizing the catastrophic isolation and intergenerational trauma that results from such systemic inequities. These firsthand accounts challenge the normalization of such injustices, calling for a reevaluation of societal structures that perpetuate inequality.

The present study has presented the daily humiliation and systemic deprivation that compromise the dignity of the Dalit community leading to cultural trauma. Such trauma leaves an indelible mark on their collective consciousness, violating fundamental ideals of equality and humanity while also challenging the moral foundation of society. The persistent caste-based discrimination detailed in these works underscores the urgent need for structural reform

and a collective commitment to dismantling oppressive systems. By bringing these narratives to the forefront, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on social justice and inspire meaningful change. The continued process of caste-based discrimination reinforces the pressing need for social reformation and a collective commitment to shatter the prevailing oppressive systems. Only through widespread awareness, inclusive education, and committed structural reform society can achieve genuine equality and restore dignity to the Dalit community.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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