

Dalit and the City: Migration, Modernity, and Fragmented Subjectivity in the Works of Ajay Navaria

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Abstract

Contemporary Hindi Dalit literature has expanded beyond narratives of caste oppression rooted in rural spaces to interrogate the complex realities of urban modernity, migration, anonymity, and capitalist alienation. This paper examines the representation of the modern Dalit subject in the writings of Ajay Navaria. Through a close reading of selected stories from *Unclaimed Terrain* and references to *Udhar Ke Log*, the study argues that Navaria departs from the conventional collective framework of Dalit resistance literature by foregrounding fragmented individuality, psychological estrangement, and the commodification of relationships within capitalist urban spaces. His fiction reveals how caste discrimination persists even within supposedly democratic and anonymous metropolitan environments.

Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Anupama Rao and Toral Jatin Gajarawala, this paper explores how Navaria's narratives interrogate identity politics, modernity, and social mobility. The urban Dalit subject in Navaria's fiction is neither wholly emancipated nor entirely victimized; instead, the subject occupies a precarious position shaped by mobility, aspiration, alienation, and internal contradictions. The paper ultimately contends that Navaria redefines Dalit aesthetics by shifting attention from collective assertion toward the fragmented and psychologically complex realities of Dalit existence in neoliberal India.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Ajay Navaria, Urbanity, Migration, Capitalism, Alienation, Modernity, Subjectivity

Introduction

Hindi Dalit literature has historically emerged as a powerful literary and political intervention against caste oppression and social exclusion. Rooted in lived experience, Dalit writing challenged the upper-caste dominance of Indian literary discourse and foregrounded the realities of humiliation, violence, deprivation, and resistance. As Beth Sarah Hunt observes, Dalit literature functions as a political as well as literary movement that seeks to reclaim representation from dominant caste narratives (Hunt 32). Earlier Dalit autobiographies and fictional narratives often emphasized collective suffering and community-based assertion against caste hierarchies. However, contemporary Dalit writing increasingly engages with the changing realities of urban migration, education, class mobility, and neoliberal capitalism.

Within this changing literary landscape, the works of Ajay Navaria occupy a distinctive position. Navaria's fiction departs from the conventional frameworks of Dalit realism by portraying the fractured consciousness of Dalit individuals negotiating metropolitan life, anonymity, and capitalist aspirations. According to Toral Jatin Gajarawala, Navaria's fiction introduces a "casteless" urban modernity that nevertheless remains deeply structured by caste anxieties and exclusions (Gajarawala 156). His narratives reveal that the transition from village to city does not necessarily liberate Dalit subjects from caste-based discrimination; rather, caste reappears in subtle and insidious forms within urban institutions, professional spaces, and personal relationships.

Critical discussions on Joothan emphasize that Dalit autobiographical narratives function simultaneously as testimony, resistance, and socio-political critique, while asserting marginalized selfhood against dominant literary structures (Sapna 18). Such perspectives offer

an important framework for understanding the urban-centered narratives of Ajay Navaria, where caste oppression intersects with migration, anonymity, and capitalist modernity.

This paper examines how Navaria constructs the modern Dalit subject through narratives of alienation, migration, fractured identity, and capitalist modernity. Through a close analysis of stories such as “Tattoo,” “Scream,” “Yes Sir,” and “Subcontinent,” the paper argues that Navaria expands Dalit aesthetics beyond collective resistance narratives and introduces a nuanced representation of fragmented Dalit subjectivity.

Dalit Literature and the Question of Modern Subjectivity

Dalit literature has traditionally functioned as a counter-discourse to dominant representations of caste in Indian literature. Writers such as Om Prakash Valmiki, Shyoraj Singh Bechain, Mohandas Naimishray, and J. P. Kardam foregrounded collective trauma, social exclusion, and resistance against caste oppression. Their writings emphasized the formation of a unified Dalit consciousness grounded in community experiences.

Navaria, however, complicates this collective framework. His fiction explores the anxieties and contradictions of Dalit individuals who have entered urban spaces through education, migration, and affirmative action policies. The city becomes a site of both aspiration and alienation. Although metropolitan life appears to promise anonymity and social mobility, caste continues to shape social relations, institutional structures, and psychological experiences. As Anupama Rao notes, democratic modernity does not automatically dismantle entrenched forms of inequality because “there is no unitary definition of equality or of citizenship around which political subjectivity coheres” (Rao xiii).

In Navaria’s fiction, the Dalit subject is not simply defined through victimhood or revolutionary assertion. Instead, the subject experiences fragmentation, uncertainty, and emotional isolation. Relationships are mediated by capitalist values and consumerist aspirations, resulting in moral ambiguity and psychological instability. Consequently,

Navaria's work represents a significant shift in Dalit literary aesthetics from collective identity toward fractured individuality.

Capitalism, Urbanity, and Alienation

A recurring theme in Navaria's fiction is the commodification of human relationships within capitalist society. The urban environment does not merely reproduce caste discrimination; it transforms its modes of operation. Violence becomes subtle, institutionalized, and psychological rather than overtly physical. Richard Somers Delacy argues that Navaria's fiction foregrounds "the limitations of a form of literary fiction that seeks to produce a discrete Dalit literary identity" within the structures of market exchange and consumer culture (Delacy 169).

In "Tattoo," Navaria depicts a Dalit character who adopts an upper-caste surname in order to secure social acceptance and economic advancement within an elite urban environment. The protagonist's encounter with a gym instructor exposes the contradictions between caste assertion and capitalist survival. The concealment of caste identity becomes a strategy for material success, yet this concealment also generates moral discomfort and existential anxiety.

Rather than condemning the protagonist, Navaria presents the situation as symptomatic of a larger social structure where capitalist aspirations weaken the politics of collective identity. The city demands adaptability and performance, often compelling Dalit subjects to negotiate between political assertion and economic survival.

Similarly, the story "Scream" portrays migration from village to city as an emotionally violent experience. The protagonist's movement into urban space does not create meaningful social alliances; instead, it intensifies feelings of loneliness and estrangement. Navaria reveals how capitalist modernity produces fragmented social relations where individuals struggle to establish trust and solidarity.

Democracy, Caste, and the Persistence of Inequality

The theoretical insights of Anupama Rao help illuminate the social structures represented in Navaria's fiction. Rao argues that democracy and inequality often coexist within modern India, and that citizenship does not automatically eliminate social hierarchies. Her understanding of Dalit subjectivity is particularly relevant to Navaria's narratives, where urban modernity fails to dismantle caste-based structures.

Navaria's characters often belong to a generation that has gained educational access and occupational mobility through affirmative action policies. However, their social advancement does not erase caste prejudice. Instead, their achievements frequently provoke resentment from upper-caste individuals who perceive reservation policies as illegitimate.

This tension is vividly represented in "Yes Sir," where the relationship between a Brahmin clerk and a Dalit senior officer exposes the persistence of caste hostility within professional institutions. The Brahmin employee constantly undermines and humiliates his Dalit superior, attributing his professional success solely to reservation policies.

At the same time, Navaria critiques the hypocrisy of capitalist morality. Jobs traditionally associated with lower castes become economically acceptable once transformed into profitable enterprises. Through the dialogue surrounding pig farming, Navaria demonstrates how capitalism reshapes notions of purity and pollution. Economic gain supersedes caste-based disgust when profit becomes central.

Durgadas's remark, "Work is work, how can it be dirty or lowly? Money doesn't smell" (Navaria 56), sharply exposes the hypocrisy of caste morality under capitalism. The story therefore reveals that caste and capitalism are not opposing structures; rather, they often operate together to produce new forms of inequality and exclusion.

The City as a Space of Anxiety and Memory

In Navaria's fiction, the city occupies an ambivalent position. It offers opportunities for mobility and anonymity, yet it simultaneously intensifies psychological insecurity. The urban subject remains haunted by memories of caste violence and exclusion.

This tension is most powerfully represented in "Subcontinent." The narrator, despite achieving economic success and urban respectability, remains psychologically burdened by traumatic memories of caste violence experienced in the village. The possibility of returning to his village for a family wedding produces fear, panic, and emotional breakdown.

Reflecting upon the psychological burden of caste memory, the narrator observes, "In this urban world of utter anonymity, there's happiness all around—unending, eternal" (Navaria 100). The passage reveals how urban anonymity only partially conceals caste trauma. The city cannot fully erase memories of humiliation and violence. Even within anonymous metropolitan spaces, Dalit individuals remain conscious of their social vulnerability. Navaria thereby exposes the illusion of urban modernity as a space free from caste discrimination.

The narrator's reflections further intensify this crisis of belonging: "Are we different? Are we separate from them? . . . are we aliens? Mleccha? Lowly? Untouchable?" (Navaria 101). These questions reveal the deep psychological scars produced by caste consciousness and historical exclusion.

Ajay Navaria and the Transformation of Dalit Aesthetics

Scholars such as Toral Jatin Gajarawala identify Navaria's fiction as a significant departure from earlier Dalit literary traditions. Gajarawala argues that Navaria's works engage with multilingual registers, urban sensibilities, and modern forms of subjectivity that distinguish them from earlier rural-centered Dalit narratives (155).

Unlike conventional Dalit fiction, where caste identity is immediately foregrounded, Navaria's characters often inhabit ambiguous social spaces. Their caste identity may remain

concealed, unstable, or psychologically internalized. This ambiguity reflects the complexities of urban existence where caste discrimination becomes less visible yet remains structurally powerful.

Navaria also introduces themes such as desire, pleasure, intimacy, and emotional fragmentation into Dalit discourse. These themes complicate the assumption that Dalit literature must exclusively focus on suffering and resistance. Instead, Navaria insists that Dalit individuals possess complex emotional and psychological lives shaped by aspiration, desire, loneliness, and contradiction.

As Gajarawala further observes, Navaria's fiction restores caste "to its location of structural power" while simultaneously interrogating the promises of modernity and urban freedom (159). His fiction therefore expands the scope of Dalit aesthetics by incorporating modern urban realities, capitalist anxieties, and fragmented individuality.

Conclusion

Ajay Navaria's fiction marks a critical development in contemporary Hindi Dalit literature. His narratives move beyond conventional representations of caste oppression and collective resistance to explore the fragmented realities of urban Dalit existence in neoliberal India. Through his portrayal of migration, anonymity, capitalist alienation, and psychological instability, Navaria reveals the persistence of caste within modern democratic and urban structures.

The city in Navaria's fiction is not a space of complete liberation; rather, it is a site where caste re-emerges in subtle, institutional, and psychological forms. His characters navigate a world shaped simultaneously by aspiration and exclusion, mobility and alienation, assertion and compromise.

By foregrounding fragmented subjectivity and the commodification of social relationships, Navaria redefines Dalit literary aesthetics for the contemporary era. His works

challenge simplistic binaries of oppression and resistance and instead offer a nuanced understanding of Dalit experience within the interconnected structures of caste, capitalism, and urban modernity.

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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