



Social Postulation of Dalit Aesthetics

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Abstract

This article formulates the conceptual basis of Dalit aesthetics emerging from the experience and materiality of Dalit life. This article departs from the mainstream idea of aesthetics in Indian and Western philosophical traditions. It contextualizes the concept of peripheral aesthetics, which emerges from cultural production from below the social strata. This article complicates the dominant notion of aesthetics as beauty, taste, and art and locates the idea of aesthetics in moral and ethical domains. Aesthetics is often thought of as one branch of philosophy, sometimes a secondary branch of little significance for the broad reaches of philosophical thought. This is occasionally odd since Kant, who is generally regarded as a founding figure in modern philosophy, sought out the aesthetic in his epistemological foundation and then developed a theory of aesthetics as the systematic unifier of knowledge and morality (Kant, 2000 p. 14). In recent years, aesthetics have revived and are slowly emerging from their philosophical eclipse. At the same time, it has been the subject of serious criticism and fundamental reconsideration. Philosophically, productive work in today's aesthetics is often more narrowly focused, looking at a specific domain and posing its specific question(s). This brings us to Dalit's specific aesthetic domain and poses questions about its idea of beauty; social relevance value, transformative potential requirement, and its disturbing use its language, image, and space.



Article History

Received: 07 December 2023

Accepted: 09 April 2024

Keywords

Aesthetic;
Beauty;
Dalit;
Epistemology;
Phenomenology;
Philosophy.

Introduction

This paper hopes to contribute to the existing but extremely limited and rhetorical perspective on the aesthetics of Dalit by addressing specific questions using an inclusive methodology and more considerable philosophical work on aesthetics. The 'Dalit' category emerges from the contestations

of historical caste injustices. According to Laetitia Zacchini, "Dalit writers and activists have located their struggle in the framework idem of modernity. They have pitted ideas of rationality and universality against the unequal Hindu system of values, which they deem superstitious, magical, and ritualistic" (Abraham, 2018 p. 74). The modern Dalit literary

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Doi: 10.12944/CRJSSH.7.1.06

movement, which has emerged as a modern Dalit print public and other form of expression, has attempted to conceptualize the aesthetics of the Dalit. It has invoked the Dalit experience confined within the Dalit materiality that emerges from Dalit lives and physical phenomena, which has to come to terms with the various and diverse forms of Dalit expression in terms of conceptual articulation, such as Dalit aesthetics. In Dalit's political actions and social thoughts, Dalit writings and articulations have mostly reduced their analysis into binaries such as Dalits and *Brhamanical* (caste elites in India) aesthetics, which are considered reactionary aesthetics from mainstream canonical aesthetics.

Dr. Ambedkar's ideology inspires the emancipatory epistemology of Dalit aesthetics, which leads to civilizational and moral aspects, ethically motivated by values such as liberty, fraternity, and equality, which emerge as affirmative aesthetics. Following Jacques Ranciere, it can be argued that "Politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject. The 'difference' specific to politics, that which makes it possible to think its subject, must be sought in the form of its relation" (Ranciere, 2010 p. 28). In this paper, I argue that Dalit aesthetics emerges from Dalit subjectivity, which defines the corporeal experience of the Dalit's objective conditions. Therefore, the Dalit experience plays a cognitive role in the production of sensory knowledge and thought; thus, the basis of the Dalit aesthetic arises from the posterior knowledge. There is an innate association between Dalit subjects and the objective condition of the material reality of Dalit subjects. In other words, Dalit aesthetics and sensory perception emerge from Dalit empiricism, and corporeality emerges from the physical experiences of Dalit reality. In this sense, Dalit aesthetics is a priori sensory knowledge. Therefore, Dalit aesthetics is not restricted only to the aspect of beauty or taste but an object of their everyday life-world.

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aesthetics has revived and slowly emerged from its philosophical eclipse. At the same time, it has been the subject of serious criticism and fundamental reconsideration.

Philosophically productive work in today's aesthetics is often more narrowly focused, looking at a specific domain and posing a particular question(s). This brings us to the specific domain of Dalit aesthetics of and makes us pose specific questions about its idea of beauty, the value of social relevance, the requirement transformative potential, and its disturbing use of language, image, and space.

Therefore, recognizing such space from which a political concern drives the aesthetic project is essential. The acceptance of temporality and contingency allows for the creation of an aesthetic that both defines the subject matter and simultaneously produces the ability and intention to analyze that subject matter. As shall be discussed in the section below, significant concerns that address and theorize the temporal and the contingent in Dalit aesthetics may be mapped as the idea of the universal, the space of morality and reason in judgment, the dialectics between self and society, and the role of experience in aesthetics formulation. These above concerns form the bedrock of the tentative Dalit aesthetics that this paper seeks to articulate.

While dealing with non-sociological readings of caste and Dalit ways of belonging, in its most general sense, the term can be used to connote the phenomenology of everyday life and its emphasis on embodiment and situations. While talking of an untouchable life-world, it is this general connotation that I resort to while keeping in mind its philosophical force as articulated in debates in European thought about the limit of (social) scientific thought.

Scope of Perspective on Dalit Aesthetics

In this context, I think of the category 'aesthetic' as more responsive to and better able than the categories of social scientific thought to represent the heterogeneous ways caste weaves itself into the dense fabric of Indian society. Adorno conceptualized the role of any form of art situated in the reflection to the composed conciliation of empirical reality: "Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them" (Adorno, 1997, p. 55)

The aesthetic can take us beyond the rational, disembodied, public self of modernity - the self that dictates social scientific discourse in India- into the phenomenology of its everyday life, replete with contradictions and myriad possibilities of living. The aesthetic has occupied a unique place in the history of modern European philosophy. In European thought, the aesthetic has been broadened beyond studying art and specific artwork. Instead, as Terry Eagleton puts it in his discussion on Adorno, the aesthetic is something that 'does not oust systematic thought but furnishes it with a model of senses receptivity to the specific (Eagleton, 2004, p. 367). Dumont posited the binary purity/impurity as the core principle of caste hierarchy (Dumont, 1983) from within this binary evolved the notion that status superiority and superior purity are identical; in this sense, the ideological distinction of purity is the foundation of the status of the caste system.

The result is a multiform of the many dimensions of Indian society and culture – its multiform life-worlds - in pedagogical terms as somewhat not modern enough, falling short of what the West considers developed. Seen through the lens of caste critique, caste, as we have seen it, appears as the most important signifier of not yet arrived at modernity. In this context, I invoke the category aesthetic as more responsive to and better able than the categories of social scientific thought to represent the heterogeneous ways caste weaves itself into the dense fabric of Indian society. The aesthetic, as I argue, can help take us beyond the rational, disembodied public self of modernity –which is the self that dictates the social and scientific discourse in India.

Through the Dalit narrative and aesthetic of Dalit, I accordingly carry over the notion of the discursivity of caste by shifting the focus from hegemonic articulation in academic knowledge formation to representations of caste in the domain of art and narrative. Artistry and literature can give us insights into the politics of Dalit aesthetics, which social science may have limitations in articulating Dalit art and beauty. I use Dalit mythographies, autobiographies and writing from other creative genres in Dalit literature, such as poetry and life-writing, to suggest that the fabrication and assertion of human relationships, within the context of the

struggle against oppression and exploitation, follow unpredictable paths and point to a much more complex relationship between the past and present of caste which is effectively reflected in critical humanities better than social science narratives may allow.

This association of pleasure, experience, and agency underscores a large section of Dalit aesthetics. While there is a simultaneous celebration of the resilient "character" that hardship and oppression create, there is also a revolt against the involuntary nature of conditions of life; this is one of the inevitable sites of much of the contradiction within the aesthetics of Dalits. It is the location of the fault line between the middle-class aesthetics of Dalits and the radical aesthetic of Dalits. This association fictionalizes autobiographies, politicizes poetry, and forms the theoretical basis of most of Dalits aesthetics.

It is important to note here that Dalit aesthetics do not label a variety of aesthetics in the way that, for example, the terms "virtue theory" and "naturalized epistemology" qualify types of ethics and theories of knowledge. Instead, to refer to the aesthetics of Dalits is to identify a set of perspectives that pursue certain questions about philosophical theories and their assumptions regarding art and aesthetic categories.

Dalits, in general, have concluded that, despite the seemingly neutral and inclusive theoretical language of philosophy, virtually all areas of the discipline bear the mark of caste in their basic conceptual frameworks. Those who wish to work in aesthetics inquire into how caste influences the formation of ideas about art, artists, and aesthetic value. Dalit perspectives in aesthetics are also attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity: how art reflects and perpetuates the social formation of caste, purity, and identity.

In contemporary times, there has been a distinctly expanded production of Dalit literary, cultural, social, and political expressions. This has simultaneously led to increased availability of such literature, the absorption of these various modes of expression by Dalit society, and critical feedback from society to the artists, writers, poets, activists, and politicians. It is important to note here that the term Dalit is

not an already given construct; it is a discourse in the making through the politics of contestation and assertion of Dalit's perspective.

Therefore, any form of literary production, artwork, and political speech simultaneously articulates the particular concerns of the writer, artist, or activist and also creates the shared social space of what it means to be a normative Dalit. Given the vast differences in language, region, sub-castes, and class, the idea of the Dalit is organized on the shared experience of exclusion and suffering and the principles of egalitarian change. All expression, therefore, simultaneously expresses the voice of the Dalit, and while doing so, it also creates this process of Dalit voice. Thus, Dalit aesthetics need to situate themselves within this dynamism. Creation of it can articulate its experience, recognize its moral position, and express its future.

The aesthetics of Dalit are configured in the everyday world of Dalit's life experiences. That is why when aestheticians refer to the aesthetics of Dalits, they are affirming the need for an aesthetic expression that will address and help Dalits in search of their daily bread to overcome their life situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy, and denial of their human identity or dignity. This reality of Dalit's life provides the reasons for forming Dalit aesthetics. The hierarchy-structured society gives rise to a horizontal way of thinking, speaking, and living; simultaneously, the realm of beliefs and symbols legitimated and sustained the old order. The composition of Dalit aesthetics is needed to transform social realization in the right direction.

Dalit aesthetics possess a life philosophy based on egalitarian moral conduct and aspiration. Its meaning is drawn from a society based on justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity. It forces one to engage in a constructive aesthetical debate in the light of one's experience and through critical self-reflection, thereby developing an aesthetic from a uniquely Dalit perspective. The ideal conceptual Dalit collective universe's process reflects society's overall transformation. Democratization of culture and society is not an automatic phenomenon but the product of political-cultural processes. The aesthetics of Dalits possess intellectual imagination to construct a possible secular society.

Theoretically, structural inequality and various social-cultural structures of oppression power are structurally imbibed into, for instance, livelihood, education, employment, security, etc. These trends and fingers of inequality have received significant attention in the mainstream body of polity and scholarly circles. The notion of social rationality seeks to relocate the process at the core of social relations at the two levels, one of epistemology and two of ethics. They recognize the essential similarity of sameness, equal worth, and uniform dignity of all human beings despite their external and, hence, superficial and cultural-historical differences. From this new enlightenment flows recent social conduct as an aspiration for the actualization of egalitarianism.

It is imperative to understand what kinds of Dalit experiences are transformed as a resource to interact with the dominant notion of culture. The word Dalit gives meaning to culture, and politics provides the answer that if one uses the word Dalit, it has to be understood in its implied meaning – i.e., the culture of resistance and contestation. Before the emergence of the Dalit category, several categories were used to understand the Dalit life, such as Gandhi used *Harijan* and Ambedkar used *excommunicated*. With the socio-cultural processes, the Dalit emerged as a significant resistance category in hegemonic culture; the Dalit cultural movements are formulating new subjectivities that force us to formulate the new aesthetic modes in Dalit culture and how Dalit tries to intervene and create the larger creative domain.

Conclusion

The central concern of Dalit aesthetics is how best to represent their authentic experience; Dalit expression is not ahistorical. Some of the recent literature has been able to analyze the caste-class dialectics by interrogating the margins. Another essential characteristic of the Dalit expression/literature is that it is not originally and essentially a literary exercise. They are the same social phenomena, more than a literary event, and a socio-cultural action in the form of an academic performance. Following this, Dalit literature and other forms of creativity portray the individual not only as one from within his/her community but also as himself/herself who wishes to stand in front of his/her community and society. The deep connection

between the individual and communal selves thus complicates subjectivity in these expressions.

This counter-hegemony of Dalits cannot stabilize and reproduce a new set of values, ideas, and notions. This new set of ideas challenges the existing ones and could provide an alternative culture. Power operates not only in the formal structures of the state but also in the social-cultural and economic sphere. Contemporary Dalit culture and politics are significant and must be understood in that context. Locating the contemporary identity politics of Dalits is essential. However, the crucial question is how far these identity politics cater to the larger project of establishing counter-hegemony.

Dalit's expression/literature needs to be understood as a counter-hegemonic force. It has impacted the potential movements that can transcend existing power relations. Dalit's writings are parallel history, contextualizing Dalit's life experience in the context of globalization, political marginalization, and subjugation. It haunts the community from generation to generation, which is the core of all these Dalit narrations. The existing cultural studies mainly focused on the aesthetic dimension of life rather than the diversity of culture. The aesthetic of the society is deeply rooted in dominant notions. The richness of the written Dalit literature made it uneasy to understand a different notion of culture.

Furthermore, extending this argument can raise more serious issues, such as whether spontaneous expressions can substitute normative theory. The

theory has the intellectual strength to argue and theorize the lived experience or existing social realities. The construction of the Dalit metaphor in Dalit literature and other forms of expression creates a gap between itself and the symbol. That is reality and the image. It is imperative to engage with the existing reality to construct a theory. Hence, the Dalit literary movement and other artistic expressions must be understood as counter-cultural movements. Aesthetics of Dalits is, therefore, simultaneously a critique of the existing social order and Brahminical epistemology as well as a revolutionary manifesto, empowering the politics of the Dalit self. It is violent and creative, disturbing and poignant, philosophical and material, communal and universal, and most importantly, political.

Acknowledgments

I thank the Centre for English Studies colleagues and PhD MA students.

Funding source

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) do not have any conflict of interest.

Data Availability

This statement does not apply to this article.

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Not Applicable

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