

*Literary Expression of Freedom and Equality: Reading Caste, Race
and the Holocaust in Fiction*

SYNOPSIS

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In the context of Dalits, African Americans, and Jews, atrocities such as segregation, mass killing, lower than human status and treatment have been frequently recorded in history. Although they live in different geographical and cultural spaces, it has been argued that discrimination towards them is of a similar kind. Various attempts have been made to create a theoretical correlation between the similarities found in the treatment of the above-mentioned communities. Dorothy Figueira's *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins* (2002), Gyanendra Pandey's *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste, and Difference in India* (2013), and Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020) are few examples that look into these similarities concerning these communities which are separated throughout space and time. Literature which is produced by them can also be seen to have some similarities in the treatment of their subject matters. Writers have talked about the conditions of their communities, sometimes in powerful ways. Consequently, it is possible to locate a strong articulation of equality, equal recognition, and freedom to live with dignity and self-respect in their texts, both theoretical and literary.

When one looks at the problem of these social communities at the root of their problem one finds an organized religio-judicial system. Historical studies have shown that legal systems and structures have been created throughout history to suppress, exploit and punish these societies/communities.¹ In the case of the African-Americans, the Declaration of Independence treated them as property and Jim Crow laws were put in place to keep them in their position. Even after the civil rights movement their situation, while altering, has not changed substantially. The analysis of the data concerning African-Americans shows that years of exploitation by the prejudicial legal systems are one of the major reasons behind the majority incarceration, police brutality, and higher rate of crimes in and towards African-American communities.² Similarly, Dalits in India faced discrimination for many centuries and laws and rules, social as well as legal, prevented them from developing or challenging the status quo. It

was after independence that SCs and STs were granted equal rights but, studies show that social realities do not reflect equality or freedom.³ In the case of Jews, they were socially isolated and alienated from other religious and cultured societies. There has been a direct link between the rise of European modernity and the aggressive antisemitism in Europe. European Jewry was not provided equal rights or status as citizens in many European countries like Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Germany (Beller 2015). It has also been noted that after the rise of the Nazi party, laws were created to exterminate history, culture, and memory of Jewish existence from Germany as well as the world.⁴

The question of law's relation with justice, liberty, and equality has been at the center of western as well as eastern philosophy, sociology, and political science. Major theorists and philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and many others have dwelt upon these concepts to understand the question of the governance of the people. But the problem has always remained that of “Tyranny of the Majority” as Mill has put it.⁵ The voices of minorities have always been marginalized, suppressed, and sometimes annihilated from history, as writings from the margins show. The rise of the ideas like pluralism, multiculturalism, social justice, the welfare state, and democracy has made some changes for the chance of what we can call a liberal and egalitarian society. Although these are not perfect, these are positive steps towards a harmonious and better future for the world.

The ideals of freedom and equality were never universal. These ideas can be traced to thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and others. As the European/western world witnessed the British, American, and French Revolutions, these ideals started getting attention

as well as currency throughout the writings of western thinkers and philosophers. But these ideas were exclusive as they excluded women, Jews, slaves, and other minority groups. Enlightenment thought, however, did make these ideals central to its discussion, but these ideas were made in the framework of Judeo-Christian tradition, which was limited in its reach. But, the language of the Enlightenment and its open interpretation of inclusion and profundity of its implications has created a path for the future generations for inclusion, in other words, critique by the governed.

The Enlightenment thought put in place ideas that led to the formulation of Marx's ideas of alienation and Max Weber's notion of "the disenchantment of the world". Adorno and Horkheimer in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have shown how the rise of reason and its conflictual relationship with tradition came to be seen as the identifying characteristic of Enlightenment thought. In this book, they talked about the results of this reactionary nature of Enlightenment, which they believed led to the Holocaust and Auschwitz (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). This they have described as the notion of "The disenchantment of the world" (1-2). They have explained the use of structures, ideologies, technology, and statistics by Nazis in their mission to organize and exterminate Jews and Jewish culture from the world.⁶ This structural pattern could also be found in the working of the USA's 'southern states' use of these ideology to persist with slavery and to keep slaves suppressed and 'in their place'. The systemic link between antisemitism and racism can be found in Beller's *A Very Short Introduction to Anti-Semitism* (2015) and Wilkerson's *Caste* (2020).⁷ Ambedkar had early recognized that the caste system is the root of the oppression of what was then called Depressed Classes. While studying at Columbia University he wrote a paper on caste titled "Castes In India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" in 1916. In 1946 he when Ambedkar heard about African-Americans petitioning United states he wrote

to Du Bois, offering his solidarity towards the movement. He wrote that he had been a “student of the Negro problem” from across the oceans and recognized their common fates. “There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America, that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.”⁸ The studies on discrimination that he worked on in America, London and Germany and his encounters with western philosophy and social science gave him courage and tools to fight the caste system. He developed the idea that without rights and laws to protect the oppressed on one hand, and social reform on the other, freedom and equality cannot be achieved.

Before Marx, all these ideas of human freedom and equality were largely discussed in an abstract form, based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The break-off of Marx from Hegelian abstract philosophy to a more practical philosophy/philosophy of praxis gave these ideals a radical turn as well as new interpretations. With the rise of modernity, the questions and problems it brought up were the questions of alienation, historical materialism, and class exploitation.⁹ The next thinker who radically rethought the questions of freedom and equality was Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that pluralism/plurality should be basis of democracy and when plurality starts to deteriorate it leads to despotism and authoritarianism.¹⁰ His work became the foundation and background for modern theorists such as Foucault and Derrida.

Recent works have established and interpreted a very congenial relationship between law and justice. (Cornell et al. 2016; Menke 2006; Valverde 1999) The problem of law and its relation with justice (and liberty and equality) has been discussed by Enlightenment thinkers discussed above. But, the recent deconstructive point of view presented particularly by Derrida has opened many possibilities for different interpretations of law and justice for the minorities around the world. Cornell et al. (2016) and Valverde (1999) have suggested that although

Derrida has provided a very substantial philosophical framework for the minorities who are demanding justice this cannot be done without the historical framework provided by Michel Foucault. My argument, therefore, is that the movement towards equality and freedom by disempowered communities has benefited from the reconceptualization of the relationship between law and justice provided by these two theorists.

After Nietzsche, and sustained by the arguments by Derrida and Foucault, philosophical thought has focused on the contradictions of enlightenment. While the profundity of Enlightenment thought on freedom and equality has been recognized, the contradictions which led to the marginalization and oppression of various groups and communities has been underlined. For example, though these ideas were conceived of in the West, many European countries prior to World War II discriminated against Jews and denied them citizenship in any major country. Even if they were granted citizenship, they have never given equal rights as citizens¹¹. In a similar way, women were never considered as equal to men and always seen as morally inferior and mentally incapable of any responsibility (Mill 2018) (Wollstonecraft 2014). In the case of African-Americans, they were never considered as individual/capable human beings until the civil rights movement in 1964-65. They were considered as property and because of this, these ideas of freedom and equality were not extended to them.

Regarding the question of Scheduled Castes of India, under the British rule they were legally regarded as full citizens with equal rights and provided special protection by the British government, but were never, in practice, granted equal rights or equal representation. Poona Pact of 1932 is an example of this discrimination. When Ambedkar, a member of Depressed Class demanded for the separate electorate such as that granted to Muslims it was opposed by Mahatma Gandhi who went on a fast unto death. Ambedkar drew on the discourse of freedom

and equality that was put in place by Enlightenment thought, but understood its exclusive qualities in the context of colonialism. He realized that colonization carries the seeds of enlightenment's thought but that enlightened ideas of equality and liberty only extend to small faction of citizens: natives, slaves, religious minorities are excluded from it because they are not citizens. The colonizers always invaded with their exclusive spatial and cultural ideology which presented inclusive hope but was based on exclusion.

Methods

This study focuses on the concept of freedom and equality in the context of second half of the twentieth century, particularly how literary writers engage with these concepts in their writings. To understand it properly many theoretical sources have been used in this study. My theoretical background reading includes the following:

- i. Theories of freedom and equality: to understand the philosophical, political and social understandings of these concepts.
- ii. Literary and critical theory: to enable the close reading of literary texts
- iii. Theories of caste, race and religion: to understand more clearly about their constitution as well as practice.

Chapters:

The first chapter discusses the theoretical and historical background of the concepts of freedom and equality. Here, I examine Enlightenment thought and history through a reading of the French, English, and American Revolutions. I refer to the writings John Locke, Edmund Burke, Isaiah Berlin, Theodor Adorno, Peter Gay, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida for setting up a conceptual and theoretical understanding of freedom and equality. This chapter argues that though the ideas of freedom and equality developed from Enlightenment in Europe but

nevertheless, these concepts were in their nature exclusive, not inclusive. The chapter also discusses the relationship between law and justice. I also discuss the manner in which these ideas have paved the way for the development of tools and paths for discriminated groups to understand their historical situation. In particular, I discuss the writings of W. E. B. Dubois on race, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on Caste and Hannah Arendt on antisemitism in their relation to Enlightenment thought.

The second chapter discusses the problem of race and systemic discrimination of African Americans in the United States of America. From their first arrival in 1619 till today African Americans in the USA are still racially discriminated against in every field/discipline. This chapter discusses, through the writing of W.E.B. Du Bois, events of the second half of the twentieth century in American politics and culture where mass protests such as the Civil Rights movement were witnessed. In 1903 Du Bois proclaimed that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of color-line, this was proven true in 1963 when the African Americans marched for their civil liberties and it is still true in the present time if we observe the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This chapter also looks at the well-acclaimed Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework for understanding the impact of systemic racism on the current cultural, economic and political status of African Americans. In the end, this chapter analyzes the serious value of fictional work such as Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to provide an understanding of the African American Writer's engagement with race, liberty, and equality. These two texts ask some of the basic questions to the American people. The first question which Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* asks is 'what is my role in all this play when I am invisible? Why is nobody ready to see me as I am? Why is this double consciousness, as a Negro and as an American, tearing me apart?'. The *Beloved* asks the questions about ownership and the impact of slavery on the mind

of the slave. The novel asks how we can morally justify the ownership of one person by another. It also shows that what slavery can do to the mind of the slaves and infinite trauma which these enslaved people have suffered collectively.

The third chapter looks at the complexities of the caste system in India with a particular focus on the experiences of Dalit communities across the country. Dalits who are formerly recognized as the Untouchables of India are legally known as the Schedule Caste (SC). Throughout the history of modern India, these communities have been discriminated against due to the rigid caste system which has out-casted them while also exploiting them in multiple ways. The attempts have been made by Scholars like Mahatma Jothiba Phule, Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Periyar, Iyothee Thass, and others to reform the society and annihilate the caste system which has created unequal society and indifferent feelings towards SCs, STs, and OBCs for hundreds of years. This chapter studies the writing of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his understanding and solution of the problem of caste. This chapter also focuses on the various movements after the 1970s which have successfully contributed to the creation of the modern Dalit consciousness that enables the challenging of the functions and effects of power. This chapter looks at the fictional works of Dalit writers to delineate their contribution towards constructing and preserving the Dalit consciousness for an emancipatory politics. Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild* (1986) and G. Kalyana Rao's *Untouchable Spring* (2000) have been selected for critical and theoretical evaluation for this chapter. These two books, as all Dalit fictions, raise questions of oppression, atrocity, and the never-ending struggle for justice, freedom, and equality. Although fiction, both the novels are rooted deeply into the history and create a connection with the reality of experience, particularly for the Dalits who are reading them. They rearticulate questions which have been raised by Phule, Ambedkar, and other social reformists regarding the need for the annihilation of caste. These two books also talk about the

everyday struggle in a way that gives pause to the reader. The tone of these two books is assertive in that the Dalits who always seem passive and in the margins of mainstream fiction should they at all appear there, are on active stage, decision-makers, fighters, problem solvers and inventors of a new system of representation with which to put their story forward the world.

The fourth chapter discusses antisemitism and its highest peak that led to the human tragedy of the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews were systematically killed in Europe. The chapter looks at the rise of antisemitism in Europe and other Western countries after the First World War as well as the pre- and post-holocaust reactions and their outcomes. It also looks at the problem of modernity and its dialectics in relation to the Jews in Europe. It focuses on aspects such as prejudice towards and discrimination against the Jewish community and its role in the predicament of the Jewish community around Europe as well as its implications in strengthening the antisemitic behaviors of non-Jews. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Löwenthal and Friedrich Pollock and others like Nathan Ackerman, Bruno Bettelheim, Morris Janowitz, Paul Messing on antisemitism, prejudice, and enlightenment, in this chapter, I argue that antisemitism has been regarded as both an irrational and rational problem of European people. Although the Jewish Question has existed for centuries but the specific forms of racial discrimination developed in in and through Enlightenment led to the extreme prejudice and ultimately, to the Holocaust. The writings of the survivors of concentration camps and their relatives depicting their memory, pain, hope, and persecution have given a new voice to the Jewish pain. These writings and memories have played a role in cultivating the new perspective towards nationalism and pluralism. The two novels analyzed in this chapter are the graphic novel *Night* (1956) by Elie Wiesel and *Maus* (1980) by Art Spiegelman. These two novels talk about memory, hope, and justice which has been denied to the Jews for the sole reason that they were the Jews. These

two novels deal with the idea of memory as resistance and remembrance as a beacon that will stop us from following the same path which has led to this tragedy. In the words of Arendt, “Storytelling, or the weaving of a narrative out of the actions and pronouncements of individuals, is partly constitutive of their meaning, because it enables the retrospective articulation of their significance and import, both for the actors themselves and for the spectators...The fact that this narrative is temporally deferred, that it is at some distance from the events it describes, is one of the reasons why it can provide further insight into the motives and aims of the actors.”¹³

The fifth chapter concludes the dissertation and pulls together the arguments made in the previous chapters in a comparative perspective. It loops back to question of justice and its relationship with equality, freedom, and particularly law.

Notes and References:

Notes and References:

1. (A)Isabel Wilkerson’s recent book, *Caste* gives very acute examples of American judicial system and its relations/impact on African-American as well as other minorities. (See pp., 124,126,127,131,217), (B)The *Manusmriti* would be right example for the Caste system in India which has dominated and dictated millions of Indians variously, and (C) Social discrimination laws of Jews in Europe would be perfect examples of these. For more on this one can look at (*Anti-Jewish Laws*) in bibliography.
2. See Wilkerson, Isabel *Caste*, pp.225,227,228,229,229,236,297,107
 “Race and Policing.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, www.nytimes.com/news-event/george-floyd-protests-minneapolis-new-york-los-angeles.

See also *How Sick Cell Trait in Black People Can Give the Police Cover* - *The New York Times* in bibliography.

3. The *Manusmriti* would be right example for the Caste system in India, and social discrimination laws) Arundhati Roy's Introduction to *Annihilation of Caste* (2014) some economical and social status of Scheduled Castes in India.
4. See "Anti-Jewish Laws." <https://alphahistory.com/holocaust/anti-jewish-laws/>
5. Mill, John Stuart, et al. *On Liberty*. Yale University Press, 2003, p.76
6. See Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford Uni.Press, 2002. pp. 1-2, 37,120,183, and Elements of Antisemitism chapter
7. Wilkerson in her book *Caste* (2020) talks about how Racism was adopted by the Nazi's to dehumanize the jews and also how it was used against the African-American slaves.
8. Wilkerson, Isabel *Caste*, (2020) p.38
9. *Foundations of Modern Social Theory* | Open Yale Courses
10. Ibid.
11. Beller, Steven. *Antisemitism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2007. p.31,38
12. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed*. New York, Cambridge U Press, 2004. Pp. 28-29
13. Entreves, Maurizio Passerin d'. 2019. "Hannah Arendt." In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2019. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/arendt/>.

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