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## A REVIEW OF THENMOZHI SOUNDARARAJAN, *THE TRAUMA OF CASTE: A DALIT FEMINIST MEDITATION ON SURVIVORSHIP, HEALING AND ABOLITION*

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Amid India's rich intellectual and spiritual heritage, an insidious legacy of caste discrimination leaves the lion's share of its population in the shadows, where, bound by the chains of an age-old injustice, their worth is ignored and their cries are unheard. Facing and yielding to subjugation for centuries, Dalits have had at least one silver lining of the advent of British rule in India, primarily the boon of entry to the education system through missionary schools. The light of education has brought a paradigm shift in the socio-political perspective of those Dalits who have been fortunate enough to shed the demeaning and disparaging narratives of Hindu religious texts that assign the Dalits a position at the lowest rung of Indian society. This epiphany finds voice through the revolutionary and modernised outlook of Dalit leaders like Mahatma Jotirao Govindrao Phule, E.V Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar), Gopal Baba Walangkar, Shree Narayan Guru and Dr B.R Ambedkar, who inspire a sense of self-worth and resilience in Dalits of Indian society. Gradually, they have realised that Dalits have not only been ostracised from the social structure but also neglected in mainstream literary representations. In most canonical literary works, the issue of caste has either been ignored or overlapped with other issues. Over the years, Dalits have understood the importance of voicing their experiences through the arts, primarily in literature. Notably, the Black Panther movement in the USA propelled a group of Dalit intellectuals to initiate an unprecedented literary movement. This resulted in the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra

that emerged in the 1960s. Due to spearheading Marathi writings, Dalit literature soon appeared in other languages through narratives such as poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies.

Likewise, the impact of Black Panthers on Dalit Panthers, the Black feminist movement, was a wake-up call for Dalit women. They realised that their male counterparts were the sole beneficiaries of the Dalit movement, while Dalit women remained marginalised in the fight for dignity and equality. Acknowledging their unique marginalisation in social hierarchy, the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) designated them as "Dalits among the Dalits" (Kannabiran, 2012: 201). Therefore, Dalit women joined the bandwagon of change through diverse forms of life writings, giving momentum to Dalit feminism in the 1990s. They used autobiographies, memoirs, and family histories as alternate historiography to challenge caste discrimination, expose casteism, and counteract the negative cultural stereotypes imposed upon them by "graded patriarchies" (Chakravarty, 2003: 83). Dalit feminist autobiographical writers like Shantabai Kamble, Babytai Kamble, Bama Faustina Susairaj, Urmila Pawar, Sivakami, to name a few, offer an unprecedented and unique perspective on Dalit women's perils and resistance. These memoirs, family history and autobiographies are "a vital source to represent the peoples without histories" (Menon, 2022: 146). However, caste practices are not only restricted to the Hindu or the Indian subcontinent. As a multi-faith issue, casteism has survived and thrived worldwide wherever South Asians have migrated. This is where the current book under review comes into play. *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist, Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition*, popularly referred to as *The Trauma of Caste* (2022) by Thenmozhi Soundararajan, is a unique amalgamation of personal memoir, history and political philosophy, interspersed with anomalous, contemplative exercises. It is not merely a book; it is a powerful manifesto of resilience, justice and an anticipated psycho-somatic liberation. With extraordinary empathy and insight, the author guides brings to light the anguish, resistance, and healing of the caste-oppressed.

*The Trauma of Caste* warrants a profound intellectual inquiry, as it marks a significant departure from and an unprecedented evolution in the traditional Dalit autobiographical narrative. Unlike earlier mentioned conventional Dalit autobiographical writers who document their experiences of microcosmic realities of caste discrimination on Indian soil, Soundararajan is a USA-based, Indian Dalit, diaspora activist who throws her weight behind incorporating Dalit subjugation within a global conversation on marginalisation and discrimination. The transnational

orientation of her memoir expands the caste discussion to global structures of oppression, drawing parallels with racial apartheid, indigenous struggles and anti-Black racism, and underscores the intersectionality of caste with race, gender and colonialism. Therefore, by expanding the epistemic boundaries of Dalit literary discourse, the memoir enriches the field of Dalit studies and repositions caste as a central axis of contemporary global justice movements.

Whereas earlier Dalit autobiographies predominantly followed a linear, bildungsroman-style structure – chronicling a progression from oppression to resistance – Soundararajan disrupts this trajectory through a fragmented and non-linear narrative. The book interweaves personal anecdotes, historical analysis and contemporary case studies, creating a polyphonic text that resists the singularity of experience. By doing so, Soundararajan pushes beyond individual testimony and places her story within a larger sociopolitical and historical context, asking the reader to view caste pain as a continuous social phenomenon rather than a discrete biographical account.

Another salient development in *The Trauma of Caste* lies in its application of trauma theory to caste-based violence. Traditional Dalit autobiographies often emphasise corporeal suffering, economic deprivation and explicit acts of discrimination. Overall, their emphasis has been predominantly directed towards unearthing and illuminating the tribulations inherent in Dalit existence, thereby rendering their approach fundamentally problem-centric. In contrast, Soundararajan employs psychoanalytic and neurobiological paradigms to explore the long-term psychological ramifications of caste trauma. Drawing upon the insights of theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Frantz Fanon, she reconceptualises caste oppression as more than a mere structural condition. Instead, she frames it as an enduring, intergenerational trauma deeply inscribed within the collective psyche of Dalit communities. In response, along with collective global activism, she advocates for individually driven somatic healing practices, shifting her approach from a purely diagnostic lens to a profoundly solution-oriented one. Specifically, Soundararajan delves into the confluence of caste, gender and mental health within the Indian diaspora, extending her analysis to encompass marginalised communities across South Asia.

Approaching caste from a feminist and Dalit Buddhist perspective, the memoir takes the reader on an odyssey from caste origin to the visions of caste abolition. It champions the restoration of spirituality and mental health as essential instruments in the fight against caste oppression. The book begins with a foreword by Tarun Burke, a leading Black feminist and trailblazer of the

MeToo movement, projecting the epitome of Black and Dalit feminist solidarity and championing the cause of those disenfranchised by race and caste on the global stage. Thereafter, in the author's note, Soundararajan unveils that her intention behind writing this memoir is to acknowledge and address the wounds of caste apartheid among the oppressed caste in India and abroad. She deems the book a tribute to the legacy of Buddha, who designed Buddhism to provide the first haven to the caste-oppressed. She suggests that another book title could be *The Dhamma of Caste*. The author divides the main book into four sections, which she entitles: "The Existence of Caste", "The Source of Caste", "From Wounds to Liberation", and "The End of Caste", and numbers them Meditation I-IV, respectively. Using her Dalit Buddhist insights, Soundararajan outlines four noble truths regarding the trajectory of caste through these four divisions, similar to how Buddha presented four truths about human suffering and its resolution.

The first section, "Meditation-I: The Existence of Caste", propounds the first truth, that caste exists. Soundararajan contends that despite the hoax of democracy upholding equality and human rights, religious and ethno-nationalism threatens all the democracies in the Indian subcontinent and across its entire diaspora. In the words of Indian diasporic, Dalit feminist, Yashica Dutt, caste is "the invisible arm that turns the gears in nearly every system in our country" (Dutt, 2019: ix). In South Asia, caste-based discrimination is a de jure offence, but de facto, it is an intrinsic part of Indian Subcontinental social and cultural practices. Brahmanism permeates each South Asian society at the atomic level, from politics to government to economy to individual relationships; it is all pervasive from the macro to micro level. Besides, wherever the South Asian people travel, they carry their caste prejudice with them, relentlessly inflicting and scratching wounds on Dalits. Soundararajan intitles caste wounds as "spiritual violence" or "spiritual illness" (2022: 8), and looks forward to building collective political and institutional power to end this aeon-old suffering, by turning the grief into a vehicle for justice and redefining Dalit identity, from broken to resilient.

Moreover, the author vividly describes the perils of her family as Dalits among the Indian diaspora in the USA, a minority within a minority. The trajectory of the Dalit American has been hiding, passing and running. Like a few fortunate ones who could leverage the bright side of reverse discrimination (termed reservation in India), the author's parents migrated to America as

doctors. Nevertheless, the albatross of caste kept on looming over their world. They lived passing as upper castes, always scared of being exposed and having “the absence of choices” (Hooks, 1984: 5). During her childhood, her mother relentlessly counselled her to hide their faith, and her father would conceal their surname. Growing up in a world of mysteries, fears, and silences rendered Soundararajan anxious, stressed, and at times, suicidal. Soundararajan recounts, “Despite my growing up in the United States, ostensibly having escaped caste, it was with me every day, in my house, in my family, in my own body” (2022: 3).

Furthermore, the author expostulates the unfounded mono-narrative of South Asianness by challenging the stereotyping of the South Asian diaspora as a model minority – middle-class, upwardly mobile, dominant caste and male. She proposes to redefine South Asian Americans as encompassing anything and everything beyond caste and gender lines and wishes to “re-discover, redefine, re-affirm and re-establish their [Dalit] identities” (Singh, 2021: 109). Thus, the first section explains why the first step towards Dalit liberation from caste endemic is to accept that caste exists in South Asia and in the diaspora worldwide. In all, this segment establishes caste as suffering and trauma, maps out its diasporic proliferation, and spotlights the civil rights movement for caste equity among Dalit diasporic communities, aiming at redefining the Indian diaspora.

In “Meditation II”, the author contemplates the second truth, which underscores that casteism has a source and a course. She charts the meticulous history of caste as a created fiction by the scriptures and philosophy of Brahmanism to dominate the people of lower caste by robbing them of their dignity, freedom and wealth. Besides, Soundararajan walks the reader through the caste dynamics among the South Asian diaspora through her personal anecdotes as a caste survivor. She recounts how Indian professors at UC Berkeley tried to dissuade the author's research on caste dynamics, leading to epistemic injustice. The students on campus were casteists who would flaunt their caste superiority and use caste slurs and the N-word for the caste-oppressed people. Soundararajan's coming out as Dalit made her a sitting duck for open caste abuse, rape and death threats which continue to date. In its USA-based survey and reach-out programs, Equality Club – the most prominent Dalit civil rights organisation in the United States, co-founded by Soundararajan – unearths cases of Dalit women as victims of human trafficking, illegally immigrated to the USA as workers in factories or households owned by caste-dominant Indians. Besides illegally trafficked Dalits. in Silicon Valley-based tech companies, forty per cent of tech

workers participating in the survey reported discrimination, bullying, ostracisation, and even sexual harassment by colleagues who were higher caste Indians.

Furthermore, this section, along with Hinduism, gives space to the manifestations of caste practices in the Shramanic faiths (Buddhism and Sikhism) and Abrahamic faiths (Islam and Christianity). The author attacks the Savarna's (caste-privileged people) fragility, who talk about castelessness, which is euphoria for ignoring or not seeing caste. The world does not need castelessness, it needs caste acceptance and awareness among caste privileged, as caste has been equally detrimental to the well-being of those on the top of the caste ladder. This section also appeals to the caste-privileged people to come out of their cocoons of privilege and speak up against caste prejudice and violence; it wraps up with therapeutic insights inspired by Black Buddhist, Ruth King.

The segment on the third meditation, "From Wounds to Liberation", discusses various facets of violence: the carceral culture of Dalits' slavery as bonded labourers for land owner dominant castes, Dalit women reeling under Brahmanical graded patriarchy, caste rapes and the culture of impunity, outcastes being on the receiving end of environmental consequences of Brahmanical economy, and cyberhatredness taking a toll on Dalits' mental health. Simultaneously, the author envisions the path of liberation from all sorts of violence through transformative and restorative justice. It calls for debrahmanising social structure, garnering global support and empathy for Dalits' rehumanisation, and above all, Dalits taking control of their own narratives and healing. Correspondingly, in the fourth and final meditation, "The End of Caste", the text offers a series of well-reasoned arguments affirming the fourth truth that the abolition of caste is both possible and imperative for the realization of a just and equitable society. This section furnishes the most incisive and revelatory perspective and thereby contributes an innovative and substantively valuable dimension to the ongoing discourse surrounding caste dynamics. The author establishes that caste is a multi-generational, historical trauma that swelled up over centuries; therefore, caste liberation cannot be merely a political and economic project. Caste has a psycho-social and spiritual foundation, and its healing lies in these realms only.

The conclusion of *The Trauma of Caste* is forceful, highly personal and politically charged, and leaves the reader with a sense of urgency and optimism. It ties together previously discussed themes of historical trauma, personal narratives, and activist strategies with an urge for readers to

confront the enduring legacy of casteism in both global and local contexts. While its lofty breadth might leave some readers wanting more details on how the transformative vision of disembodying caste and embodying healing can be put into action, it is an appropriate conclusion to a text that aims to encourage both meditation and action. Following the book's main body are five appendices, each serving a distinct purpose. They provide valuable insights into key activists and contributors to the Dalit movement, explore its spiritual dimensions, present data on caste violence and socioeconomic indicators across South Asia, and offer reflective worksheets designed to help readers engage with their own experiences -whether from a position of caste privilege or oppression. As these appendices contain nuggets of vital information, their integration into the main text could have strengthened the overall impact of the author's argument and rendered the reading experience more immersive and compelling.

On balance, the book may be most meaningful to readers already familiar with the complexities of caste dynamics. Nevertheless, this transformative book is unreservedly recommended to anyone who wants to decipher and confront the modern-day latent realities of caste-based oppression and activism worldwide. Prepare to be moved, challenged and forever changed by its profound message of hope and collective liberation.

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