

Marginality, Suffering, Justice

Questions of Dalit Dignity in Cultural Texts¹

Pramod K Nayar*

Dalit dignity is organized around caste-determined labour that fits them into hierarchies of social dignity but which, in savage irony, renders them undignified as humans through social death. Second, the self-conscious, agential narrative enactment of life-as-death and the performance of death enables the Dalit text to establish the dignity of the Dalit body.

*Department of English, The University of Hyderabad. pramodnayar@gmail.com

This essay assumes that representations of marginality, suffering and social injustice in cultural texts dealing with Dalit lives in contemporary India raise questions of dignity. Thus, while they do address concerns of social inequality, historical wrongs and the failure of the juridical apparatus, they also examine the idea of Dalit dignity.

Etymologically the word dignity comes from the Latin word for 'worthiness'. Obviously, the idea implies a dual meaning: worthiness in one's own eyes, and a social evaluation of worthiness. The second meaning is linked to another etymological origin of 'dignity': 'worthy, proper, fitting' and 'to accept'. This is our cue to examine the question of dignity and cultural discourses around it.

My thesis is two-fold. First, Dalit dignity is organized around caste-determined labour that fits them into hierarchies of social dignity but which, in savage irony, renders them undignified as humans through social death. Thus, the Dalit can only acquire dignity through acts of non-agential, undignified labour over which they had no choice, and for which their bodies are only to be used by others in order to safeguard the interests of others. Second, the self-conscious, agential *narrative enactment* of life-as-death and the performance of death enables the Dalit text to establish the dignity of the Dalit body.

Before addressing the texts themselves, I set out to frame the question of Dalit dignity via other readings.

Between Immanent and Civic Dignity

It is inexplicable that the word and the concept, so central to the theories of Human Rights, has been so undertheorized. There appears in many 20th century texts an implicit or explicit link between rights and dignity. For instance, the German Constitution (1945) Article 1 with the declaration: 'human dignity is inviolable'. In Article 2 it adds: "The German people *therefore* acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world". The Helsinki Accords (1975) claim that human rights 'derive from

¹ An earlier, shorter version of this essay was presented at the "Reclaiming Social Justice: Revisiting Ambedkar", International Conference, Bengaluru, 21-23 July 2017.

the inherent dignity of the human person'. And, of course, the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) says in its opening line:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,...

Later this Declaration would add:

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...

The Preamble to the Indian Constitution speaks of 'fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual' but does not examine the idea of dignity in any sustained manner. Upendra Baxi however, believes that "the Indian constitutional combination of fraternity and dignity wages a war against the indignity of caste-based apartheid" (431).

In terms of the philosophical foundations that seek normative modes of defining human dignity Marcus Düwell writes:

The scope of ascription of human dignity is *universal* in the sense that it applies to all human beings, it is *egalitarian* insofar as each human being is equal with regard to his dignity and references to human dignity are justifying *duties towards others* that have the form of *categorical* obligations. (2014: 27, emphasis in original)

Josiah Ober attempting to theorize dignity writes:

Dignity can be defined as *non-humiliation* and *non-infantilization*. We suffer indignity – humiliation and/or infantilization – when our public presence goes unacknowledged, when we cringe before the powerful, when we are unduly subject to the paternalistic will of others and when we are denied the opportunity to employ our reason and voice in making choices that affect us. (2014: 53-4, emphasis in original)

Like Ober, other commentators such as Sanjay Palshikar have defined humiliation as "an unwelcome assault on human dignity" (2009: 79). Humiliation, says Upendra Baxi, is the "Other of dignity" (2014: 429). Gopal Guru posits a "set of concepts that form into a logical class comprising humiliation, shame, insult, indignity, and misrecognition, as also the opposite set of values, that is, respect, dignity, and recognition" (2009: 2).

It thus seems safe to say that dignity is linked to questions of recognition (hence respect from the others, or the world) and a sense of self-worth. The denial of dignity, leading to humiliation, may also therefore, be read in terms of the erosion of a sense of self due to social contexts. (I am not, at this point, examining the right to die with dignity and other bioethical, biomedical issues. Arguments in this domain draw upon, among others, principles laid out by the Council of Europe's Convention on Bioethics (1997) and by UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, 2005.) It is linked to injustice, marginalization and suffering, in other words.

Critics studying the discourses around Human Rights have addressed the ‘foundational fiction’ of human dignity (as Nobel Laureate JM Coetzee termed it). For instance, Elizabeth Anker in her *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* writes: “...liberal human rights discourses and norms ... are they underwritten by the dual fictions of human dignity and bodily integrity” (2). There is, scholars note, a link between suffering and dignity. Cultural critic Lata Mani writes:

First, that suffering leads to a loss of dignity; second, the absence of choice leads to suffering and indignity; and third, control over self and circumstance facilitates freedom from suffering and in so doing, preserves dignity. Deducible here is an ideal of mastery over self and context or at least, the ability to set limits on how one is impinged upon by social forces and more broadly, by the conditions of life (2011: 24).

Dalit texts that document atrocities, violence, denial, repression and outright erasure of Dalit lives are, in effect, documenting the denial of civic dignity even when they speak of individual violations. Civic dignity, as Josiah Ober defines it, is neither meritocratic (by rank/lineage) nor immanent (all humans as possessing dignity). Ober writes:

Meritocratic dignity, as we have seen, is predicated on intensely personalized relationships. Human dignity, as an inherent attribute of the individual, rests neither on personal nor on political relationships among people. Civic dignity stands in between these poles: it is predicated on a shared status of political equality among a body of citizens – a defined set of people who are jointly committed to the preservation of a public domain (Greek: *politeia*; Latin: *res publica*), but who are not social peers and who may have no personal ties with one another. Civic dignity is available to and protected by free citizens who have an equal opportunity to participate in a public domain of decision and action. Because civic dignity is grounded in *political* and not in personal relations, it cannot be reduced, conceptually, to meritocratic or to universal human dignity (55).

Reading Dalit cultural texts one is struck by the oscillation between dignity as immanent and dignity as a civic condition, emerging from interactions across communities and castes, and reliant upon a social order. Ambedkar in his writings was aware that ascribing dignity to *all* humans was pointless unless there was a political mechanism to ensure equal access to the public domain.

Ambedkar’s first use of the term in his classic *Annihilation of Caste* is in connection with the perceived slight to the upper-castes. Ambedkar writes:

The Hindus looked upon the use of metal pots by untouchables as an affront to their dignity, and assaulted the untouchable women for their impudence (2014, Vol. I: 40).

And again:

The Hindus of Chakwara thought otherwise, and in righteous indignation avenged themselves for the wrong done to them by the untouchables, who insulted them by treating ghee as an item of their food—which they ought to have known could not be theirs, consistently with the dignity of the Hindus (40-1).

Elsewhere, in his ‘Note to The Indian Franchise Committee (Lothian Committee) On the Depressed Classes, submitted on 1st May 1932’ Ambedkar would reiterate:

Why will not a Hindu touch an untouchable? Why will not a Hindu allow an untouchable to enter the temple or use the village well? Why will not a Hindu admit an untouchable in the inn? The answer to each one of these questions is the same. It is that the untouchable is an unclean person not fit for social intercourse. Again, why will not a Brahmin priest officiate at religious ceremonies performed by an untouchable? Why will not a barber serve an untouchable? In these cases also the answer is the same. It is that it is below dignity to do so (Vol. II: 492).

In his *Philosophy of Hinduism* Ambedkar explicates the Manu penal code that was designed, in Ambedkar’s interpretation, to protect the dignity of the Hindus. Ambedkar writes:

The most striking feature of Manu’s Penal Code which stands out in all its nakedness is the inequality of punishment for the same offence. Inequality designed not merely to punish the offender but to protect also the dignity and to maintain the baseness of the parties coming to a Court of Law to seek justice in other words to maintain the social inequality on which his whole scheme is founded (Vol. III: 31).

In his ‘Safeguards for the Scheduled Castes’ in *Constitution of the United States of India*, Ambedkar would write:

The Hindu has a Code of life, which is part of his religion. This Code of life gives him many privileges and heaps upon the Untouchable many indignities which are incompatible with the dignity and sanctity of human life (Vol. I: 426).

Ambedkar aligns the caste system, then, with the *perceived* loss – and threat of loss – of dignity to the Hindus, implying that the oppressive caste system becomes a way of preserving *their* dignity against intrusions by the so-called lower castes. This is where Ambedkar’s discourse crosses domains with UDHR and the moral-philosophical discourse of the ‘inherent’ dignity of all human beings while being alert to the necessity of political mechanisms to ensure this dignity for all. What Ambedkar points to is a simple enough historical development in Indian polity: the ‘upper-caste’ Hindus were extremely conscious of their dignity, and any perceived slight to this was to be thwarted. That is, the caste system as an oppressive social mechanism was a weapon employed to defend the dignity of the Hindus, suggesting that the Hindus – or at least a section – were imbued with the sense of their own individual and collective worth. Dignity is inextricable from their collective identity *qua* Hindus, and the defence of one was the defence of the other. In other words, human rights could be denied, claimed or defended once dignity had been differentially ordered and allotted.

Dignity, in Ambedkar’s reading of Manu and Hindu history, is self-recognition that demands the other’s recognition. If dignity is ‘an elevated status in a status-ranking’ (Hartogh 2014: 201), then it follows that the denial of this status from other ranks in the hierarchy may be read as an affront to dignity. Dignity, therefore, is not only about identity but about a social position, in this reading: it is primarily civic dignity. When Ambedkar points to the Hindu anger over supposed affronts, he is referring to not merely the idea of inherent dignity but also to social hierarchies with their attached notions of dignity.

Ambedkar’s emphasis is on the precise construction of selective inalienable dignity as a human being which precedes the selectivity of the human rights regime in the form of the caste system. In other words, it is ontological dignity born of a moral imperative that *precedes* any legal

doctrine or political theory of rights. When ontological dignity is reified along specific lines such as caste then, as a consequence, many fall outside the legal frame of rights.

Indeed, the loss of dignity has become a major theme in cultural psychology and human rights discourses even as studies have focused on everyday contexts. For instance, the Humiliation Inventory of Evelin Gerda Linder (2001) developed a scale of humiliation (see www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/hartling/HartlingAssessingHumiliation.pdf), all of which focus on everyday life. Questions of dignity and humiliation, then, constitute the *moral-philosophical* underpinnings of legal discourses of human rights, equality, justice and emancipation. When we assume dignity is inherent rather than earned, then we have an entirely different perspective on the question of rights because, as Düwell et al note, the concept ‘does not, and probably cannot, exist in a society without laws to protect the *rights* that flow from it rather than the principle itself’ (xix).

The postcolonial state of exception and postcolonial necropolitics is founded on policing the borders of dignity. The denial of a productive life with the fulfilment of its potential is the denial – it is *not* the violation of dignity, because violation implies the existence of something open to being violated – of Dalit dignity.

In his book *Radical Inequality*, a study of Gandhi and Ambedkar, Aishwary Kumar suggests that for the Phules and later BR Ambedkar,

[the] conception of freedom foregrounded those everyday prohibitions—indignity, segregation, untouchability—that seemed too mundane, too constrained by an obsession with the ethics of social life, especially on the scale of a nationalism concerned with grander projects of spiritual well-being (20).

Kumar’s emphasis is on the structures of social inequality that work at the level of the *everyday*, and hence are ignored in favour of larger nationalist themes and issues. The marginalization and exploitation manifest as everyday indignities, suggests Kumar. In each case, one notes, there is a tension between dignity as a universal condition accruing from being human, and dignity as a civic condition framed within socio-political processes.

Cultural Representations and Dalit Dignity

To return briefly to Elizabeth Anker’s work, the dignified body, she argues, is a coherent, autonomous and agential body: “the dignified individual in possession of rights is imagined to inhabit an always already fully integrated and inviolable body: a body that is whole, autonomous and self-enclosed” (3-4). Corporeality, she writes, is “a baseline condition that precedes the ascription of dignity and rights to an individual” (4).

In other work, elsewhere, I have examined dehumanization, infantilization and infrahumanization as processes that violate the autonomous human body (Nayar 2016). I do not wish to revisit that line of argument here. Instead I focus on three specific modes of asserting dignity that one can discern in Dalit cultural texts today: spatiality, labour and the performance of life and death.

Spatiality

In response to Gandhi's idealization of the Indian village, Ambedkar was categorical that the village was 'a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, [and] narrow-mindedness' in his 'Speech Delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1948' (176). Later in his 1948 *The Untouchables* Ambedkar would explicitly refer to the question of space:

...social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It [was] a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire, into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto.\ (Vol. VII: 266).

Elsewhere in *Untouchables Or The Children Of India's Ghetto*, in a chapter appropriately spatial in its title, 'The Indian Ghetto—The Centre Of Untouchability— Outside the Fold', Ambedkar would note that

The Indian village is not a single social unit. It consists of castes.

But for our purposes, it is enough to say—

I. The population in the village is divided into two sections—(i)

Touchables and (ii) Untouchables.

II. The Touchables form the major community and the Untouchables a minor community.

III. The Touchables live inside the village and the Untouchables live outside the village in separate quarters.

IV. Economically, the Touchables form a strong and powerful community, while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community.

V. Socially, the Touchables occupy the position of a ruling race, while the Untouchables occupy the position of a subject race of hereditary bondsmen (Vol. V: 20-21).

And in *States and Minorities* he would say:

It is the close knit association of the Untouchables with the Hindus living in the same villages which marks them out as Untouchables and which enables the Hindus to identify them as being Untouchables (Vol. I: 425).

Ambedkar would note that the prohibition from using public facilities such as wells, temples or from riding on a horse or a palanquin through main roads were constitutive of the practice where sections of society were left to the indignity of begging for water (Ambedkar would document his experiences at school when he was disallowed the use of the school water supply) or using side-roads. As Cháirez-Garza has argued, Ambedkar was alert to the social construction of space and saw social relations, especially untouchability, as a mode of organising the spaces of the village. By emphasising the proximate lives of 'upper' and 'lower' caste Hindus, Ambedkar is able to propose that it is this proximity that drives the upper castes to introduce social segregation. The result is the indignity of being a part of the public and yet not.

In one sense, the Dalit movements to gain access to temples and public spaces anticipate 'Occupy' because it is the attempt in fact to assert themselves *as* the Indian public. Dalit texts

such as Bama's *Karukku* and Valmiki's *Joothan* often spend a considerable amount of time describing the Dalit ghettos and the social organization of their space by the upper-castes, the squalor inside the ghettos and the norms of usage of public spaces. To participate in public spaces of their own volition without recourse to fear or opprobrium is to be a part of the public. Spatial and social boycotts, therefore, are modes of violating the dignity of the Dalit precisely because these 'bodies' are limited to specific modes of civic presences.

Labouring Bodies and Dignity

The policing of dignity as social reification was diagnosed early by Ambedkar. In his chapter 'The Revolt of the Untouchables' of his book *Untouchables Or The Children Of India's Ghetto*, Ambedkar would write:

The Hindu Social Order is based upon a division of labour which reserves for the Hindus clean and respectable jobs and assigns to the Untouchables dirty and mean jobs and thereby clothes the Hindus with dignity and heaps ignominy upon the Untouchables (Vol. 5: 258).

When Ambedkar famously critiqued the caste system as a division of labourer and labour, he was pointing to the intrinsic link between identity reification and the larger issue of dignity. Gesa Lindemann, also examining dignity as a social creation, writes:

The more advanced the division of labour is, the more a society is dependent on individuals being capable of performing different kinds of labour in different sub-groups. It is the individual that has to handle diverse role expectations in an individual manner. Therefore, the notion of the individual person becomes a structural necessity for modern society. In this way, the individual human being comes to hold dignity (2014: 193).

Lindemann elaborates:

It is not the individual as a biological nor as a rational being who has dignity, but rather the individual as an emergent normative structural necessity of a functionally differentiated society. The concrete biological, individual human being has dignity as long as she/he obeys the basic normative necessities of functional differentiation (193).

The division of labourers that Ambedkar spoke of is effectively the social organization of Hindu society by earmarking certain bodies as destined only for certain kinds of labour. A naturalization of the association between certain bodies and certain forms of labour is effected in the social organization of a village, as almost every Dalit memoir and autobiography documents. A Dalit who uncomplainingly performs his assigned labour, is then, in traditional definitions of 'dignity', dignified. That is, the Dalit who sticks to his pre-destined role alone, performing undignified work with no choice of abandoning it, alone is granted dignity. There is no scope, clearly, for the *acquisition* of dignity for the Dalit, in the traditional caste-determined model.

Following from this reading: when individuals refuse to fit into the functionally differentiated order, with their 'assigned' places in life, for example through social and professional mobility, then it is deemed that they have lost their dignity. The battle for equality is then a battle for fluidity across the differentiation. If a person refuses to accept the normative conditions of functional differentiation s/he loses dignity, or more accurately, may have her/his dignity taken away. But this is precisely the point: for the historically disenfranchised, Ambedkar's

questioning of the preexisting functional differentiation is a call to define dignity as the *resistance* to such a differentiation. Dignity, if it hinges upon mobility and a *lack-of-fit* into existing differentiation, is then an assertion of agential dignity. This could be at the individual or collective-communitarian level.

I shall have reasons to return to this question of labour later, but it is worth noting that Ambedkar, like Lindemann is speaking of civic dignity. Civic dignity for the Dalit body is possible only when s/he performs undignified labour. Any resistance to this socially ascribed dignity linked to certain kinds of work would result in beatings and dehumanization.

Corpsing and Dignity

I propose that Dalit cultural texts adopt a singular strategy to speak of their violated dignity, as both individuals and as a collective. Following the work of David Marriott (2016) on African Americans, I shall term this ‘corpsing’.

The word ‘corpsing’ (verb) signifies a blunder occurring when, in the performance of a role, an actor is ‘put out’ of his part. A role that is corpsed is one that exposes the limits of performance and, depending on the metaphor, denotes the ‘death’ of theatre, *as* theatre. A role that is corpsed, which is something contrary to the usual performance of a part, is one that evidently does away with an actor’s mastery (of illusion) and no more clearly than when the disjoin between persona and part is exposed. Corpsing is also evident outside theatre; we see it when people fail to live up to or grasp their social roles (Marriott 2016: 32).

The question Marriott asks is: “What if one’s role is to be socially that of failure or if one is ordered and commanded to perform a role through one’s corpse-like obliteration, would this not mean that corpsing can only occur when one refuses that spur and its contagious pleasure? Would this not be an example of a “death” of death” ...? (34). African Americans, Marriott argues, “live under the command of death (as citizens, parents, siblings, and subjects); consequently those who obey this rule are said to live under a law of symbolic death and are regarded as subjects who are already dead. social death has to do with how rules of life are connected to the symbolically dead” (34).

For Dalit lives to go beyond the tradition that relies on what Marriott terms the ‘symbolic representation-as-disfiguration’ (38), its cultural texts must change the understanding of what it means to be Dalit and *living*. Roles that enact social death – whether in the form of indignities, beatings or forced labours of the *safai karamcharis*, a whole new conception of living, ‘beyond the common wretchedness, neuroses, and social dishonor’ (Marriott 61) will be needed.

Performing Life

It is the indignity of life enacted *as* death that is documented in *Karukku*, *Outcaste*, *Akkarmashi*, and the poetry of Dhassal. The point is: these texts do not deal with extreme cultures of violence. They demonstrate how indignity is not the indignity of death but the indignity of living *as though* they are corpses without agency.

In Valmiki's *Joothan*, when he has to deal with the carcass, he proves he is alive because he uses his body but he uses it *without* agency. Proving he is alive as a Dalit is to demonstrate his social death. In the earlier Shankarrao Kharat's 'Corpse in the Well' (in Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*) when the boy asks his father who is guarding the corpse as to when he would eat, the father responds: "Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?". Later, when the constable questions him, Anna, the father, says: "The Mahar's village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?" So the constable wishes to know what the family members of the dead man would have to say, and Anna responds: "The heirs of the corpse will say, 'were we dead that you touched our kinsman's corpse?'..."

Reflecting upon the state of the nation, Sikhamani in his poem 'Pardon' writes:

To appreciate the real picture of this nation
I need another life.

This is an extraordinary image. Sikhamani could be saying he needs to be born again to appreciate India's true picture. But it is also possible that he is deploring the fact that when leading a Dalit's life he cannot understand the true picture of India. Sikhamani is suggesting a disconnect between forms of life and forms of signification. The real picture of the country is irretrievable, or beyond understanding, because its signifiers are not available to the Dalit's life, whose signifiers are primarily about the loss of choice of meaning, except those *assigned* to them. It is the end of signification that Sikhamani mourns, and consequently the end of living itself

I have four key points to make in cultural constructions of Dalit life.

First, enacting life in Dalit texts draws attention to the social death they experience. The language of living matter conveys this social death. Thus the insults and abuse, including physical beatings, torture and chronic hunger, that constitute the bulk of the Dalit autobiographical narrative may be read as the enactment of life *as* death. Then, enacting essential 'Dalitness' through symbolic representations is to be complicit with the very processes of essentializing that brought about social death, and so the Dalit texts refrain, often, from portraying essentialisms. Instead Bama, Valmiki, Jadhav and others even when speaking of their community's rituals or belief systems also speak of their resistance to these. For instance, Bama and Limbale speak with some derision about the superstitions of their community. Rather than lapse into nativist valorization of their practices, the Dalit text, recognizing that such a self-essentialising discourse would also open them to essentialising by the upper castes and thereby condemn the Dalits to the same identities they have been fighting to escape from. Third, the slave uses his body, but does not perform work or labour. The Dalit labour is not human but allows others, specifically the upper-caste landlord or factory owner-capitalist to *be* human (I adapt here Agamben, 2016). In other words, the Dalit labouring body does not possess agential control over his/her body or labour. It is deemed non-productive except when it serves the interest of the upper-caste in an inverted biopolitical regime. Finally, life and living is about the *form* of life and its possibilities. 'Form-of-life' is the set of facts but also the potential and possibilities of living (Agamben 2016). When the form-of-life is denied a Limbale, a 'Baba' (in

Jadhav's *Outcaste*), Bakha or a Velutha, all possibilities of dignified living, are denied them as well.

The role of 'being Dalit' means the death of the actor/actant. It means enacting the social death ordained for the Dalit, although they may be ignorant of this 'corpsed' role. Thus, when they obliterate/erase themselves because it is *expected* of them (obliteration is the social role assigned to the Dalit), then they are deemed to be alive: their enactment of their social death is proof that they are truly Dalit lives. Accepting social death, willingly or out of ignorance (and this might be generational), is to be alive. Dalitness murders itself when it feels most alive because then it performs what it is expected to perform, as a *Dalit body*: it is the social ordering of 'Dalit life' or 'Dalit death' which, if the Dalit takes on, results in the murder of himself *as* Dalit.

When sources, origins and teleologies are emphasized (for example, in claiming a pre-Hindu origin), it traps the Dalitness within the same rhetorical and symbolic structures that enabled their essentializing. That is, when the Dalit undertakes to prove s/he is alive as Dalit, it is self-essentializing that is the obverse of the essentializing used historically to outcast them. Essentializing Dalit lives is to accept the socially ordained lives, which itself is death-like.

Enacting social and symbolic death in life to prove they are alive is to be complicit with the racist inhumanizing language that killed them. The Dalit is not seen, even by Dalits themselves, beyond the symbolism of being a body, or a corpse. Dalit life sustains itself as already dead. As Toral Gajjarawala puts it, it is not cataclysmic and massive events of death that such cultural texts around Dalit lives document. Rather it is 'the mundane relationship to death experienced on a daily basis by the Chamar' (182). That is, in the process of living up to what is expected of them *as* Dalits, they die socially, denied their dignity in the civic set up.

Performing Death

When Valmiki in *Joothan* speaks about his labours, he presents it as akin to dying. He thus closes off life as a Dalit because it is akin to (social) death. When skinning the carcass of the dead animal he describes his emotions as 'drowning in a swamp', 'the blood inside me was congealing' (35). Bama links humanness with dignity when she poses a series of questions: 'are Dalits not human beings?...Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity?' (27). She even wishes, she writes, 'that it would be better to be dead and gone rather than carry on living like this' (78). In the very opening pages of Jadhav's *Outcaste*, Damu requests the villagers to inform his family that he would be home late because he was set the duty of guarding a corpse, the constable retorts:

Do you think we were born as messengers for you lowly outcastes? Your woman is not going to die if she does not eat one night. And if she does, who cares? (4)

Later, Damu speculates:

What did they care if a Mahar lived or starved, or even died? All they were concerned about were the high-born (6).

In each of these cases, the Dalit text enacts death as a way of affirming life itself, because to claim life is to enact social death at the hands of the caste system.

I suggest that Dalits employ the language, complete with tropes and figural turns, of corpsing.

They do so by enacting and performing death through the language of corpsing is to expose the theatre of death. They reference a void (both social and interior) *as* Dalitness (and vice versa) which then prevents their absorption into a narrative of historical wrongs or teleologies of (casteist, patronising) emancipation, and its romanticization. Third, enacting death and void is to stay contingent and flexible, open-ended and plural. Finally, Dalit language is about not essentialising 'Dalitness' – because this essentialising is precisely what casteist and racist language does. Dalitness is about denying essentialisms through ambiguity, open-endedness and refusal of teleologies and fixity of meanings. When we say a Dalit text is singular it means that its opacity must be maintained, and its resistance to established meaning, or perhaps even translation. Dalit texts might need to reject the quest for origins, because it is in origins that the essentialising tropes begin.

Dalitness goes beyond a traditional mode of speaking of interiority and substance (or secret and ultimate meaning), which would be a romanticisation of Dalit lives. Fragmented interiorities in Bama or Jadhav are instances of this refusal to subject themselves to the norms of the standard autobiographical modes. Dalit writing demonstrates how Dalit lives are constantly rendered, or play, 'dead' within the signifiers of law, history and social codes available to them. When the Dalit author claims an emptiness inside it is a marker of the failure of signification, or rather, of the signification assigned to them which would reiterate their exclusion.

This performance of death suggests that existing signifiers are corpsing signifiers, but there is no 'beyond' such a signification. It is by drawing attention to corpsing as a socially accepted signifying system that the Dalit asserts Dalitness: demonstrating an awareness of the conventions that render them dead. Dalitness is about *performing* a corpse-like remnant, which reveals the corpsing qualities of language, social structures – consciously drawing attention to the *performance of death* and not life. (To perform Dalit life is to perform its social death, since this is what is ordained for it).

Dalitness must itself be deemed as a void whose emptiness is irretrievable whether in the form of historical allegory or romanticism. The enactment of the void is the enactment of neither historical reduction (Dalits perceived and portrayed as empty) nor romanticism (void as actually possessing substance). It lies beyond retrieval because processes of retrieval are themselves complicit with the structures that 'voided' the Dalits. Also, the assumption of retrieval assumes a plenitude *before* the 'voiding' by the social order.

Conclusion

It is, of course, as Laura Brueck warns us, absurd to 'characterize all Dalit writing ... as occupying a singular oppositional idiom' (2014: 4). Nevertheless, seeing significant patterns and developing frames for reading the aesthetics of these texts ensures that they are not consigned to

the ghetto, or idiom, of social documents alone. Hence, this paper's insistence on the narrative enactments.

In the case of the caste-driven biopolitical regime, the Dalit in fact represents a not properly human life that renders possible for others the *bios politikos*, that is to say, the truly human life, to adapt Giorgio Agamben (21).

The enactment of life-as-death and the performance of death enables the Dalit text to establish the dignity of the Dalit body. Marginality, suffering and justice are enacted symbolically and materially around Dalit bodies, and their representations in textual form demands new strategies, of which this paper has outlined two: the enactment of life and the performance of death.

If the photographic image, as Roland Barthes argued, is aligned with death, then what is the valency of the photograph of a corpse? Is it the living image of a dead thing? As Peter Schwenger argues, "When a real corpse is subject to this figurative corpsing, then, certain issues of the photographic image are raised in their most extreme form" (2000: 396)

Adriana Cavarero in her work on horrorism has argued that destruction of the 'ontological dignity of the human figure' is true horror (9). However, in these texts and discourses, playing at this loss, or enacting this loss, is a means of surviving the strategies of horror imposed by the social order. To survive, argues Didier Fassin, 'is to be still fully alive *and to live beyond death*' (83, emphasis in original). To survive, as the Dalit does in all these texts, is to live beyond the horror to which their living has condemned them. To survive is agential, and the marker of dignity.

To survive is also to remain recognizably human after all the horror. As Francois Debrix puts it, ...even in horror, even when the body, life, and the human have been frozen and left in place to be dismantled and reduced to dust, something will live on. Yet, ultimately, this something that lives on can and perhaps must be seen as a someone, as a *human* body or life that has been transferred to or transmuted into things, objects, words, and all their traces (91, emphasis in original).

The sense of worth – dignity – is what the text enacts in the process of enacting the death of the Dalit, while being alive. The humiliation of life-as-death is subsumed by emphasizing the performance of death. What is fitting, to return to the etymology of dignity, is to not *accept* the traces of the history of humiliation, but to be *aware* of the traces so as to make different, and informed, choices for the future.

These choices cannot be asserted purely as autonomous creatures, even when humans. Certain ecologies need to be in place for human beings to lead a productive life. When Dalit texts describe the poverty, squalor, disease and unliveable conditions of their existence, even putatively, choices are foreclosed them. We cannot, then, interpret the dignity of the individual independent of the dignity of the collective – which entails the creation of ecologies that enable the community as a whole to not only survive but also thrive.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2015. *The Uses of Bodies. Homo Sacer IV.2*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford UP.
- Ambedkar, BR. 2014. *Writings and Speeches*. Ed. Hari Narake. Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, New Delhi. 2nd. Ed. <http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/content/>.
- . 2014. *Annihilation of Caste. Writings and Speeches*. Compiled by Vasant Moon. Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India. New Delhi. Vol. 1.
- . 2010. 'Speech Delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1948', in Bhagwan Das (ed) *Thus Spoke Ambedkar*. Navayana, New Delhi. 2010. 160–186.
- . 2014. 'Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto', in *Writings and Speeches*. Ed. Hari Narake. Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, New Delhi. Vol. 5.
- . 2014. 'The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?' In *Writings and Speeches*. Ed. Hari Narake. Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, New Delhi. Vol. 7.
- Anker, Elizabeth S. 2012. *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature*.: Cornell UP, Ithaca and London.
- Bama. *Karukku*. 2012. Trans. Lakshmi Holmström.: Oxford UP, New Delhi. 2nd ed.
- Brueck, Laura R. 2014. *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*. Columbia UP, New York.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2011. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. Trans. William McCuaig. Columbia UP, New York.
- Cháirez-Garza, Jesús Francisco. 2014. 'Touching space: Ambedkar on the spatial features of untouchability', *Contemporary South Asia* 22.1 (2014): 37-50.
- Debrix, François. 'Horror beyond Death: Geopolitics and the Pulverisation of the Human', *New Formations* 89-90 (2017): 85-100.
- Düwell, Marcus, Jens Braarvig and Roger Brownsword. 2014. 'Why a Handbook on Human Dignity?' in Marcus Düwell et al (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Düwell, Marcus. 2014. 'Human Dignity: Concepts, Discussions, Philosophical Perspectives', in Marcus Düwell et al (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.: Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Fassin, Didier. 2010. 'Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life', *Humanity* 1.1 (2010): 81-95.
- Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. 2013. *Untouchable Fictions: literary realism and the crisis of caste*. Fordham UP.
- Guru, Gopal. 2009. 'Introduction: Theorizing Humiliation', in Gopal Guru (ed) *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford UP. 1-19.
- Hartogh, Govert Den. 2014. 'Is human dignity the ground of human rights?' in Marcus Düwell et al (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Jadhav, Narendra. 2003. *Outcaste: A Memoir*.: Viking, New Delhi.
- Kumar, Aishwary. 2015. *Radical Inequality: Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Risk of Democracy*.: Stanford UP, Stanford.
- Lindemann, Gisa. 2014. 'Social and cultural presuppositions for the use of the concept of human dignity', in Marcus Düwell et al (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.: Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Mani, Lata. 2011. 'Human Dignity and Suffering: Some Considerations', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46.36 (2011).
- Marriott, David. 2016. 'Corpsing; Or, the Matter of Black Life', *Cultural Critique* 94 (2016): 32-64.
- Nayar, Pramod K. 2016. *Human Rights and Literature: Writing Rights*.: Palgrave-Macmillan, London.
- Palshikar, Sanjay. 2009. 'Understanding Humiliation', in Gopal Guru (ed) *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford UP, 79-92.
- Schwenger, Peter. 2000. 'Corpsing the Image', *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 395-414.
- Sikhmani. 2013. 'Pardon', in K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu (eds) *From those Stubs, Steel Nibs are Sprouting. New Dalit Writing from South India: Dossier II: Kannada and Telugu*.: HarperCollins, New Delhi.
- Valmiki, Omprakash. 2007. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee.: Samya, Kolkata.