Aromas of Asia

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Aromas of Asia

Exchanges, Histories, Threats

Edited by Hannah Gould
and Gwyn McClelland

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CHAPTER 6

Words That Smell

Caste and Odors in Hindi Dalit Autobiographies

Shivani Kapoor

Caste, Writing, and Senses

In the opening paragraphs of Dr. Tulsi Ram's autobiography, *Murdahiya*, we encounter a sentence which starts "My grandfather, who was called Joothan. . . ."[1] *Joothan*, a Hindi word, refers to leftover or half-eaten food.[2] It also refers to the practice, followed across India, of giving away leftover food to people from lower-caste communities. This practice derives from the discriminating and humiliating principles of caste, which bind people in a "graded hierarchy" according to the caste group into which they were born.[3] Tulsi Ram's autobiography, *Murdahiya*, introduces us to his grandfather Joothan, who belonged to the Chamar caste in eastern Uttar Pradesh and used to work as a bonded laborer in the fields of Brahmin landlords—an occupation that was passed on to Tulsi Ram's father as well.[4] The name "Joothan,"

possibly a metonym given to the grandfather by the upper-castes, signifies his lowly and degraded status, much like half-eaten food. It also signifies the caste-marked feudal relationship between those who throw away food and those forced to consume it. The name also draws our attention to the ways in which the organization of the senses and sensory experience are crucial in the practice and structuring of the caste system. Leftover food, or half-eaten food, invokes a strong sense of disgust. It assails the visual, olfactory, and gustatory senses by signifying something that was discarded or could be rotten or putrefying. Further, leftover food carries with it the strong association of being contaminated with another's saliva.[5] Joothan's name thus reiterates his permanently polluted state at every utterance. It is significant that another Dalit[6] writer, Om Prakash Valmiki, also agrees to name his autobiography *Joothan* at the suggestion of a fellow writer and editor.[7]

The caste system, with its fundamental reliance on maintaining norms of purity and pollution, is an exercise in careful negotiation of sensory perception and experience. Caste produces a discourse where names and their spellings, clothes (their material, their color, and their absence), the odors and taste of food and of bodies, the dialects and intonation of language, the height of the home's boundary wall, and the nature of life rituals are indicative of caste status. The "graded hierarchies" of the caste system thus produce performative selves expected to arrange their sensoria, bodies, and environments according to their position in the caste hierarchy.

In caste-stratified societies, Gopal Guru argues, due to the "compulsions" of modernity, untouchability as "a practice and as consciousness" may no longer appear on the "surface of social interaction" and has been forced to "slide" to the "bottom of the hierarchical mind." Hence, to understand how caste functions, Guru argues one needs to use "archaeology as a method."[8] I take forward this suggestion to argue in this chapter that one way to understand the deep layers of caste would be to take in its odors. The politics of smell constitutes, in a significant manner, the politics of caste. The practice and experience of caste is smeared with the odors of bodies, spaces, and objects, which, when breathed in, reveal the intricate ways in which the powers of caste operate. Surajpal Chauhan, in his autobiography *Tiraskrit*, writes about the dexterity that his caste community has in dealing with pigs. Chauhan recalls one such instance when his uncle Gulfan, who possessed great skills in slaughtering, was working on recently caught pig to distribute the meat within the community. As Gulfan was dismembering the pig, he flung its urinary bladder at a group of children nearby, secretly signaling Chauhan

to catch it. As Chauhan caught the coveted bladder, the urine within it fell all over his body. Later, his mother cleaned the bladder, and for the next few days, Chauhan played with the bladder as a balloon. Later, he converted it into a small drum. Chauhan writes, "The bladder would stink when I would bring it close to my mouth to fill it with air. But I was not disgusted by that stench. However, the thing is that poverty forced us to have such a destiny."[9] Chauhan's narrative and the stench of the pig's bladder that it conveys is deeply indicative of the ways in which practices of caste force certain communities into the margins of sociality, dignity, and resources. This narrative also provides an insight into how caste structures and produces sensorial experience for the person experiencing them firsthand as well as for the reader. It also provides crucial clues about how Dalit communities have negotiated this sensorial experience, especially in the case of disgust and humiliation.

The sensory nature of the language of literature in general and autobiographies in particular, I thus argue, presents a vast archive of the odors of caste. Dalit autobiographical literature is a "rich sociological text" that "opens up an intellectual and emotional corridor into the social reality of dalits."[10] These texts are thus more than simply self-writing (as autobiographies are often characterized) or "testimonios" to the social injustice and humiliation inflicted upon Dalits.[11] These texts, I argue, are intensely political forms of writing that argue for creating a space for hitherto marginalized voices in the public sphere and in history. These texts in fact announce "the emergence of a Dalit personhood as a figure of suffering" and demanding due recognition and resignification for this self.[12] Because these are texts of protest and resignification, most Dalit autobiographical literature also adopts distinct literary and aesthetic tropes, often in direct confrontation with Brahmanical ideas of language and propriety.[13] As such, these texts are often written on more affective registers compared to upper-caste texts, showing the humiliation, injustice, and disgust that Dalit selves have been subjected to. Complicating this argument, however, works of scholars such as Laura Brueck and Sarah Beth also show how Dalit autobiographical narratives often fall into conventional modes of dealing with issues of class and gender, similar to the upper-caste narratives.[14]

Reading has primarily been thought of as an audiovisual process. However, I argue that reading needs to be thought of as an affective and sensorial act, a synesthetic activity that conjoins, however momentarily, the worlds of the reader and the writer. Smells also have a synesthetic quality that allows them to merge with other senses. Within the caste discourse,

the sense of smell is often thought of as a "contact sense" much like touch.[15] If smells indeed touch us, then it can be argued that odors fundamentally alter our internal states. Reading a Dalit text then effectively means inhaling the odors of the Dalit world and immersing oneself into the sensuousness presented by the author. This could then also mean that Dalit texts have the potential to pollute, modify, and resignify the selves and bodies of the reader. This is where the most subversive potential of the odors of Dalit text lies.

Foregrounding sensory registers of caste, this chapter asks two questions: First, what do the odors of caste, conveyed through writing, mean for our understanding of caste? Second, what does it mean to smell caste through these writings? The chapter begins by examining how odors constitute caste and how they are represented in writings on caste. The discussion then moves to the reproduction of this olfactory sensorium in autobiographical literature and the consumption of these smells by the reader. The stench of blood, raw meat, tanned skins, and fecal matter is translated into words and becomes a part of the reader's ontology, invoking repulsion, disgust, embarrassment, and sometimes guilt. The chapter thus examines the relationship between caste and odors by locating these in the act of writing and consumption of Dalit literature. In doing so, the chapter asks what the political significance of a sensory reading of Dalit literature is. Does it affect the way in which we understand caste and Dalit politics?

Dalit autobiographical literature is a significant moment of assertion in Dalit movement and politics. This moment is defined not just by the act of writing but also by the fact that this writing is meant for the society at large to take cognizance of the historical and social injustices faced by the Dalit community and their demands for redress. Dalit autobiographical literature is thus a discursive act. Senses, which are not just our windows to the world but also produce and categorize the experience of this world for us, reiterate the discursive connections between the readers' and the writer's worlds. The self, as Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson have argued, "is not only a knowing subject and the object of symbolic (and largely linguistic) knowledge but also and more precisely a feeling and sensing subject and the object of somatic experience."[16] A sensory overlay on this reading and writing seeks to understand this sensing subject of caste. This discussion returns the debate on caste to the terrain of the body and not just that of the Dalit autobiographer, but since these are circulatory texts, the bodies of everyone who comes in contact with or who constitute these texts is involved in a discursive performance and production of sensations. In effect, the chapter draws

attention to the discursive nature of not just writing and reading but also of caste, sense of smell, and odors.

One way to examine the sensory nature of Dalit writing is by description, using these accounts to enter the complex web of caste interactions and to map various kinds of odors, their meanings, and their boundaries. The second method, which will be preferred here, is to use odors as an analytical category. This means to not just focus on the physical odors and their descriptions but also to examine the nonodorous through the lens of smell—for instance, do words smell?

Writing Life: Memory, Senses, and Politics

In an evocative moment in Valmiki's autobiography, he narrates an incident from 1984 when a Brahmin schoolteacher asked students to tear out the pages of a lesson on B. R. Ambedkar from their books.[17] Valmiki, deeply influenced by this event, became a part of the protests that followed and subsequently wrote a poem, "Vidrup Chehra" ("Crooked Face") on the incident. In Valmiki's words, "At that moment I experienced my belonging to the Dalit movement intensely."[18] This incident brings to focus two related issues. First, under caste rules, the lower castes are not allowed to gain knowledge of religious texts such as the Vedas. This resulted in Dalits's exclusion from formal education in many parts of the country by the discrimination practiced by upper-caste teachers and administration. Even though these actions have been declared illegal by the Indian Constitution and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Act (Prevention of Atrocities) of 1989, ongoing denial of education and other basic rights has continued to occur. Valmiki himself writes about his experience in the government school in the 1950s: "Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class. . . . I was not allowed to sit on a chair or a bench. I had to sit on the bare floor; I was not allowed even to sit on the mat. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. From there, the letters on the board seemed faded."[19]

Guru rightly points out that in educational institutions the "stigmatized other" is produced through "social boycott."[20] The exclusion of Ambedkar's anticaste ideas from the classroom and the discrimination faced by Valmiki because of their caste status are examples of this "social boycott," aimed at erasure of memory and history, and perpetuated by the upper-caste and

Brahminical establishment on society. Ambedkar and his ideas represent the odor of caste that may be quite intolerable for some upper-castes. Second, Valmiki's autobiographical writing brings these ideas into the public and illuminates the disgust, repulsion, and oppression caused by this erasure. This kind of writing also forces the reader to reckon with the struggle involved in forging the Dalit self through writing and reading in the face of blatant denial of knowledge to Dalits by the caste discourse.

Writers like Valmiki compare autobiographical writing to wrenching out parts of one's life, reliving pain and disgust to present an account of oneself.[21] Others write about the perils of implicating the whole community through writing about an individual life.[22] Perhaps one of the strongest statements on writing of this kind about life has been that it is like digging oneself out of a burial ground, where memories of caste and its oppression have been buried for a long time, alongside those who suffered it.[23] The following section will build upon the acts of tearing and digging to examine the debates and the contestations involved in writing about life in the Dalit world. This section will also examine the role of senses in writing and reading Dalit writing.

Autobiographical writing in Hindi grew as a genre from around the 1990s, influenced by the growth and circulation of Dalit literature in Marathi.[24] The first well-known autobiography in Hindi seems to be Mohandas Naimishraya's *Apne Apne Pinjare*, published in 1995. Valmiki's autobiography, *Jhoothan*, came out in 1997, after being first published as an autobiographical narrative *Ek Dalit ke Aatmakatha* in 1995 in the book *Harijan se Dalit*. These two texts are largely regarded as the first in the field of Hindi Dalit autobiographies, and they generated a great deal of discussion on the form, content, and language of Dalit writing in Hindi. They also inaugurated a wave of Dalit autobiographies throughout the next two decades.

By writing and circulating Dalit texts, individuals and communities make an assertive claim to Dalit identity in a context when the discussion on the humiliation and injustice of caste in the public sphere is limited at best. Anupama Rao suggests that caste subalterns transform key political categories, including rights, equality, and citizenship, through recourse to constitutionalism and the use of the universal adult franchise.[25] Similarly, one could propose that caste subalterns also transform the genre of writing, literature, and autobiography by their acts of "digging out." Their acts of writing immediately implicate others, and, therefore, these are not just instances of the subaltern speaking, or speaking differently, but also a forced transformation on society. Sharmila Rege has rightly argued that Dalit life

narratives cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present, for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways by which the silences and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered.[26] This is why Dalit writing is a political act.

The act of choosing, and consequently forgetting, parts of one's life and memories to write as a public text is an exercise in politics. Recalling and reproducing one's life in the public sphere or choosing not to reveal these details are ways in which people "understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past."[27] This is complicated by the fact that "memory is an inescapably intersubjective act" and "acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective."[28] Writing about one's life always implicates the "other" and often also one's own community.[29] This can be compared to the intersubjective and discursive act of smelling and interpreting odors. Senses, particularly smell, have an intrinsic relationship with memory. "Sensory memory is a form of storage," argues Nadia Seremetakis, where "the memory of one sense is stored in the other."[30] Paul Stoller terms smells as "the strongest catalyst of memories" that "cannot be silenced."[31] Classen, Howes, and Synnott have argued that "the perception of smell, thus, consists not only of the sensation of the odors themselves, but of the experiences and emotions associated with them."[32] The odors described in Dalit autobiographies are equally important in terms of understanding the politics of remembering and forgetting. Sensory perception is not merely a biological process but instead is a social and political phenomenon that actively produces the world around us. Odors are present all around us and have an influence on how we inhabit space, create memories, evaluate people and places, and interact with our environment. The carriers of smells—bodies and objects—are political actors constructed through their location in power/knowledge. The politics of odor derives from aesthetic, moral, and social power, which inheres in their description and classification. The power or knowledge to name an odor as good or bad, as disgusting or pleasant is ultimately an exercise in politics (see also McClelland in this volume). Within the discourse of caste, the power of pollution makes the issue of odors more urgent. Why do certain odors pollute? Can an odor "pollute" one's caste status?

Describing an instance of interpellation of odors and memories, Naimishraya writes in his autobiography about a meeting with a Muslim girl from his neighborhood whom he was attracted to while she was making dung cakes.[33] The girl, he writes, was often smeared in cow dung because of her household duties, and Naimishraya recalls how he found the smell of dung mixed with

the odor of her body extremely desirous. In this instance, the odors are assigned contextual meanings, especially through the trope of memory. While in the popular discourse, cow dung is thought of as smelling bad, it has an important place in social life. Dried cow dung cakes are a commonly used household fuel in many parts of India. Cow dung is considered as having purifying and medicinal properties within the Hindu religious and caste discourse. In the autobiography mentioned, however, cow dung becomes a signifier of desire and memory between a Dalit-Muslim couple.[34] Odors thus enable not just descriptions of materials, spaces, and bodies, but their recollection and association in memory and writing can also provide analytical tropes for understanding the ways in which caste operates and is challenged.

Ultimately, one must return to the "sociological richness" of these texts, which invokes sense memories sometimes even in the absence of material triggers. M. S. S. Pandian thus rightly proposes that those narrative forms such as autobiographies, which Guru characterizes as "raw empiricism" or what social science theory describes as "emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical," can in most instances produce "morally and politically enabling knowledge(s) about Dalits and other subaltern groups."[35] Not bound by evidentiary rules of social science, the privileged notions of teleological time and claims to objectivity and authorial neutrality, these narrative forms produce enabling redescriptions of lifeworlds and facilitate the reimagination of the political.

The next section exemplifies some of these writings in detail in order to understand how the smells of caste are represented in writing and what they mean for our understanding of caste. I will consider these texts along four registers—public identities and spaces, occupational identities, naming, and acts of resistance.

The Smells of Caste

Writing about smells challenges their "absence from history writing"[36] and further, "olfaction serves to construct the subject."[37] Yet it is notoriously difficult to write about smells. Smells are often represented through other sense words and concepts. There is also always the question of being able to represent smells through words. "To write of smell," writes Alison Booth, "is like drawing a fruit-scented highlighter over the lines of representation."[38] Yet writing about smells is a revelatory exercise in spite of these challenges. The subject constructed through olfactory descriptions represents

carefully composed sensory descriptions of memory, politics, and knowledge. Danuta Fjellestad has argued that in literature, smell, taste, and touch may not always be "sensorily available" and are always "linguistically mediated."[39] The nonolfactory and the multisensory nature of smells are thus an interesting characteristic of these texts. In this section, I will examine the smells of caste identified in Dalit autobiographical writing under four registers—public spaces and identities, occupational identities, naming, and resistance. Mohandas Naimishraya provides an olfactory mapping of the city of Meerut in his autobiography *Apne Apne Pinjare*. He writes:

> The Muslim neighbourhoods were rife with the fiery smell of kababs [meat]. Mornings in the Hindu localities brought the odors of jalebi [sweets] and kachori [savory], while the evenings would be filled with the smells of balushyahi and imarti [sweets]. But our areas would be naked . . . flattened of all sense of smells, maybe odorless but then maybe a peculiar sense of malodor would hang over the locality. Every house was filled with leather in various forms and the heavy malodorous air would give away the fact that somewhere nearby there exists a chamarwada.[40]

Naimishraya's smell mapping of the city overlaps its caste and religious boundaries. The passage also indicates ways in which the olfactory character of spaces determine their caste status and how certain odors like that of leather hides and tanning mark the lower-caste spaces, "as both a space apart and a space to pollute."[41] This revelatory potential of odors when combined with the signification that odors carry makes them powerful agents of classification and hierarchization.[42] Hans Rindisbacher has argued that in the European context, as public spaces became more sanitized, smells retreated to passages in books, which became more sensuous than actual spaces.[43] This process was more complicated in the case of caste. Under the influence of colonial modernity and the postcolonial developmental state, public space was sought to be ridden of caste-based identities while, at the same time, Brahmanical sensibilities were normalized as the default.

For instance, Valmiki writes about the behavior of the upper-castes in his village:

> If we ever went out wearing neat and clean clothes, we had to hear their taunts that pierced deep inside, like poisoned arrows. If we

> went to school in neat and clean clothes, our classmates said, "*Abey, Chuhre ka*, he has come dressed in new clothes."[44] If we went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, "*Abey, Chuhre ke*, get away from me, you stink."
>
> This was our no-win situation. We were humiliated whichever way we dressed.[45]

Similarly, Surajpal Chauhan, in another Dalit autobiography, writes about coming back to his village from the city. On the way, he asked an old upper-caste man for water. The man asks Chauhan who he is visiting in the village, thereby eliciting his caste identity. On realizing that Chauhan belongs to the "untouchable" family in the village, the older man says, "When those born of Bhangis and Chamars come back from the cities wearing new clean clothes, we cannot even identify whether they are Bhangi or not."[46]

Both Valmiki and Chauhan challenge the myth of a "modern" nation-state and an egalitarian public sphere by pointing out how bodies and spaces were marked as "lowly" and "smelly."

In postcolonial India, caste was viewed as the remnants of a rural feudal order that still held some power and significance in village economies and was studied in benign categories like the jajmani system. As a result, it was understood that antimodern practices such as untouchability would simply wither away from the impact of development. Simultaneously, legal and policy measures created a public sphere devoid of untouchability, and this was by default understood to be a public sphere without caste. The decades following independence would, however, prove that the obituary of caste was far from written, and in fact it would adapt itself to not just modernity and democracy but to the nation-state itself. The "transcoding" of caste in urban contexts only attempts to flatten the visual markers of caste.[47] This chapter argues that while urban and modern contexts may provide this visual anonymity from the oppression of caste identities, other sensory markers, such as odors of the body, flavors of food, and accent of speech, have continued to give away caste and cause the extenuation of oppressive environments.

Attempting to dispel the myth of the absence of caste in the modern public sphere, Valmiki comments on the identification of caste through uniforms issued to municipal sanitation workers. Lacking resources to buy woolen clothes, Valmiki manages to procure a "khaki jersey from a municipal employee."[48] Although the jersey he got is dyed green, his college mates still call him a "sweeper."[49] Both Chauhan's civil "city" clothes and Valmiki's

"khaki jersey" do not conceal their caste identities, hinting at the larger failure of the modern public space and the state to dispel caste hegemony. Dalit literature and politics has simultaneously engaged with the emancipatory potential offered by modernity and the Indian nation-state while also engaging in a deep critique of "triumphant nationalism,"[50] "privileged modernity,"[51] and "civilizational claims of Indian nation-making."[52]

The Brahmanical order, which came to stand in as the mainstream public order, was certainly not deodorized, but while its smells were accepted in the public sphere, other "undesirable" affects were pushed to the margins. Naimishraya writes, "The crisp texture of the starched white *dhoti-kurta* [traditional male garments] of the priest, the click-clack of his wooden slippers, the sounds of chants coming from his mouth," identified him as an upper-caste member.[53] Given the encoding of senses through caste, the sonic and haptic effects of the priest's body create the illusion of a body that does smell good. In contrast to the Brahmanical odors, the *chamarwada* is thus made to stand out as malodorous. Sanitization and deodorization of space and language constitute each other, not just making a space of caste but also a language of caste. In some measure, the Dalit literature used as a lens in this chapter challenges the normalization of Brahmanical sensibilities by writing about the repressed and elided odorous contexts.

However, as mentioned before, nonolfactory triggers can at times also trigger a sense of smell. Aniket Jaaware[54] and Sunder Sarrukai[55] write about the nonphysical nature of touch. In a slightly different but related formulation, Laura Marks talks about haptic visuality—the ability of film images to "touch" the viewer and to convey smell and taste. (See also Tang on Hong Kong cinema in this volume.)[56] Written words thus powerfully convey sensory stimuli such as olfactory sensations, as is evident in the "Joothan" or the sense of repulsion felt at seeing a "sweeper's uniform." Names, occupations, and language themselves become important olfactory markers of caste bodies.

The politics of caste and naming, including "Joothan," is discussed at length in these autobiographies. Chauhan writes about the names of his family members, "However pleasant sounding our names might be, the upper-castes in the village had made it a practice to distort them. Bhup Singh became Bhopa, Swarup Singh was called Sarupa, Radha Devi as Radhiya and Kiran became Kinno . . . my father Rohan Lal was called Rona. When these upper-castes cannot even tolerate our names, how will they like us?"[57] Disfiguring names forces an undesirable aspersion on the person. Being

interpellated with negative, demeaning names is a denial of coevalness and of personhood.

Ambedkar, commenting on Gandhi's efforts to engage with the question of caste and untouchability, writes a scathing critique of the latter's ideas. Here we could imagine that the name "Untouchability" evokes a bad smell: "Mr. Gandhi felt that an organization which will devote itself exclusively to the problem of the Untouchables was necessary. Accordingly, there was established . . . the All-India Anti-Untouchability League. The name, Gandhi thought, did not smell well. Therefore . . . it was given a new name—The Servants of the Untouchables Society. That name again was not as sweet as Mr. Gandhi wished it to be. He changed and called it the Harjan Sevak Sangh."[58]

Ambedkar was probably referring to a metaphorical smell of "Untouchability," which did not bode as well for Gandhi's ideas as did the smell of "Harijan" (children of God). In changing the name from "Untouchable" to "Harijan," Gandhi removed the smell of untouchability from the public sphere, but in the end, this made no difference to the social and political position of the untouchables. Thus, Guru, in critiquing the idea of "Harijan" writes, "It was artificially imposed on the untouchables by Gandhi and those upper-caste people who could not genuinely integrate them within their social consciousness despite its divine association. Overall, the category of Harijan lacks a discursive capacity."[59] It is perhaps the restoration of this discursive capacity and the production of resistance to the caste order that Guru refers to when he writes about the Dalit resignification of *joothan* as "poison bread" that denies "the tormentor a complete sense of domination."[60] Guru is referring to the many instances of Dalit resistance where the threat of pollution has been exercised against the upper-castes.

Two short stories provide us further instances of these resistances. In *Sadhandh*, Arjun Sawediya writes about a sensory relationship between two Dalit communities—the Chamars and the Bhangis/Mehtars, who live next to each other in *tin ka nagla* in Agra.[61] The Bhangis occupy a mound in the colony, marked by the stench of a leather tannery (see McClelland in this volume). The Chamars, the more socially dominant Dalit caste among the two, who work at the tannery, live a little further down the mound, away from the sights and smells of hides. A religious occasion brings the two communities together inter-dining, and the situation explodes when the Bhangis refuse to pick up leftover food and plates—work assigned to them under the caste order—claiming that they are equal participants in the event. Several

days pass as the whole place begins to stink of rotten food. When Chamar elders ask a young Mehtar woman to pick up the filth because it is impossible to live with the stench, she replies, "Who knows about smell better than us, but now we will not do this work."[62] Her reference to the malodorous work her community is forced to do and the stench of leather hides among which they are forced to live, challenges the imposition of the caste norms by the Chamar elders. The young woman juxtaposes two malodorous contexts with each other to complicate caste norms.

Writing Smell, Reading Caste

"The most discriminating nose must admit all odors," writes Booth while writing about the smell of literary narratives. The important question within my own research was to ask whether the readers of the autobiographies, especially the upper-caste reader, smell caste when reading these narratives. I argue that Dalit literature forces readers to alter their sense of self—from an individualized atomized self to one that is porous, mixing with the self of the text. What does this do to our notions of the self and the body? Aniket Jaaware, in his writing on Dalit literature, states provocatively that one can eat the Dalit—and consume Dalit literature.[63] The consumption of such writing provides an inward gaze for Dalit readers, as it allows their assertion of marginality and community formation. Non-Dalit readers, according to Jaaware, are relieved of the burden of caste and touch, as literature is consumed, celebrated as revolutionary, and thus digested and contained as "Dalit literature." Therefore, according to Jaaware, non-Dalits manage to eat the Dalit without ever eating with the Dalit. It is only through this act of "metonymy"—of substituting touch for words—Jaaware argues, that the non-Dalits can bear to touch the Dalit through the Dalit's words.[64]

Other formulations further complicate the idea of readership of Dalit literature. Guru argues that the Dalit middle class may find these texts as a source of embarrassment because they "summon an undesirable past."[65] On the other hand, Guru argues, these autobiographies may invoke "guilt in the minds of the upper-castes by recording the social wrongs done to Dalits by their ancestors."[66] Arun Prabha Mukherjee, the English translator of Valmiki's autobiography writes, "Although I had been introduced to Marathi Dalit literature in translation before I read Joothan, its impact was much higher on the Richter scale of my consciousness because it was speaking of my corner of India, in my first language, Hindi, in a way that no other

text had ever spoken to me."[67] The text fundamentally alters Mukherjee's sense of self and becomes a part of his knowledge system through a familiar language and context.

Conclusion

The "scent of the narrative" is a powerful trope from which to unravel the issues of power and hierarchy in any system of gradation.[68] "To write of smell is to couple the body with a history of discourse that has colonized that sense," argues Booth.[69] Caste, with its location on the physical and the social body, can be written and read through these scents, which often also operate through synesthesia. While these odors do depend on the reader to be decoded and understood, Dalit writing shows how the odors of caste speak on their own very loud, defiant, and messy terms. They provide a resistance to a neat and circumscribed "progressive emplotment" of Dalit worlds and in doing so challenge the Brahminical hegemonic sensorium.[70] Dalit texts act as powerful narratives where sensuous knowledge and affects are used in an embodied fashion to produce and resignify caste-marked selves. This embodied and sensorial nature of writing draws the reader into the complex histories, bodies, and memories of the Dalit world. More importantly, odors transcend boundaries and may even at times threaten to alter the readers' sense of their caste selves. This is an important outcome of the continuing widespread circulation and discussion of Dalit literature and its odors.

Notes

1. Tulsi Ram, *Murdahiya*, 9.
2. All translations from Hindi are my own, except for Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography, Joothan, where Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation has been used.
3. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 234.
4. Chamars are a Dalit caste in Uttar Pradesh and other parts of north India. Under the caste system, they have been "associated with impure activities such as leatherwork and the removing of dead animals." Chamars also work as "landless agricultural and manual labourers." Ciotti, "Chamar," 900.
5. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 34.
6. Dalit, meaning "broken down" is a self-referential term adopted by large sections of the former Untouchables. The word was first used by B. R. Ambedkar in his newspaper *Bahishkruit Bharat*. He defined "Dalit-hood" as "a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order." The Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s popularised the use of "Dalit" as a "revolutionary category" for its ability to signify oppression and "recover the emancipatory potential of the historical past of Dalit culture." Guru, "Politics," 15.
7. Valmiki, *Joothan*, xiv.
8. Guru and Sarrukai, *Cracked Mirror*, 203. Untouchability is one of the important practices of caste, where lower-caste

bodies are regarded as "polluting" for those higher than them. This manifests as physical and social distancing, prohibition on physical and social contact, inter-dining, and intercaste intimate relationships. There have been extensive cases of violent punishments and retributions for the lower caste on the ostensible violation of these boundaries. There have been debates on the relationship between caste and untouchability. Most famously, M. K. Gandhi was in favor of abolishing untouchability but retaining the caste system as integral to the Hindu social fabric. In strong opposition to this position, B. R. Ambedkar argued for a complete annihilation of caste itself as the only way for emancipating the untouchable groups.

9. Chauhan, "Tiraskrit," 26–27.
10. Guru, "Review of Joothan."
11. Nayar, "Bama's Karukku." The term "testimonio," as Ana Forcinitio describes, is "used in Latin American Cultural and Literary Studies to refer to a narration marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and/or of resistance against that same condition (and therefore a narrative that accounts for the construction of collective subjects and emphasizes agency). It is also used to refer to a narration that reveals the urgency to bear witness to an event or series of events perpetrated with the aim of eliminating a community or a group." As such, the term has also been used to refer to Dalit autobiographical writing, which also takes up the task of calling out injustices.
12. Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood and the Collective," 431.
13. See Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*.
14. Brueck, "Narrating Dalit Womanhood," 25–37; Beth, "Hindi Dalit Autobiography."
15. McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*, 6.
16. Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson, "Aroma of Recollection," 7.
17. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the foremost anticaste thinkers and political leaders of India. He was the chair of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. For more details, see Rodrigues, *Essential Writings of Ambedkar.*
18. Valmiki, *Jhootan*, 129.
19. Ibid., 3.
20. Guru, "Tragic Exit."
21. Valmiki, *Jhootan*, xiv.
22. Chauhan, *Tiraskrit*, 7.
23. Ram, *Murdahiya*, 9.
24. Beth, "Hindi Dalit Autobiography," 547. Between 1952 and 1954, the serialized autobiography of Hazari had appeared in *Hindustan* with the caption "*Ek Harijan Ki Ram Kahani*"; it was subsequently translated in English under the heading "An Outcaste Indian."
25. Rao, *Caste Question*.
26. Rege, *Writing Caste / Writing Gender*, 13.
27. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 20.
28. Ibid., 20–21.
29. On the collective nature of Dalit writing, see Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood and the Collective"; Nayar, "Bama's Karukku"; Satyanarayana, "Experience and Dalit Theory."
30. Seremetakis, "Memory of the Senses," 4.
31. Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, 85.
32. Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*.
33. Naimishraya, *Apne Apne Pinjare*, 115.
34. Although Islam does not have caste in its scriptural tradition, in South Asia due to conversions and the assimilation of Islam in the wider society, Hindu caste norms and practices have become adapted within parts of the Muslim community.
35. Pandian, "Writing Ordinary Lives," 34.
36. Jenner, "Follow Your Nose?," 337.
37. Booth, "Scent," 3.
38. Ibid, 3.
39. Fjellestad, "Towards an Aesthetics of Smell," 642.
40. Naimishraya, *Apne Apne*, 11–12. A 'chamarwada' is the locality where Chamars, an outcaste community that works with leather, live; for an example of a similar community in Japan, see McClelland in the previous chapter.
41. Lee, "Odor and Order," 475.
42. For more on the relationship of odors, caste, and hierarchical spaces, see Kapoor, "Violence of Odors."
43. Rindisbacher, *Smell of Books*, 28.
44. Meaning, "born of a Chuhra." Chuhras, also called Bhangis and Mehtars, are a Dalit caste in parts of north India, especially Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Under the caste system,

they have been forced to work as sweepers and manual scavengers. Some sections of this caste have claimed the "Valmiki" identity, which seeks to resignify the humiliation and discrimination carried in the term "Chuhra" or "Bhangi."

45. Valmiki, *Joothan*, 4.
46. Chauhan, *Tiraskrit*, 32.
47. I borrow the idea of "transcoding" from Pandian, "One Step Outside Modernity."
48. Valmiki, *Joothan*, 88.
49. Ibid., 88.
50. Gajarawala, "Some Time," 576.
51. Ibid., 576.
52. Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood and the Collective," 431.
53. Naimishraya, *Apne Apne*, 29.
54. Jaaware, *Practicing Caste*.
55. Sarukkai, "Phenomenology of Untouchability."
56. Marks, *Skin of the Film*.
57. Chauhan, *Tiraskrit*, 41.
58. Ambedkar, *Untouchables*.
59. Guru, "Politics of Naming," 16.
60. Guru, "Review."
61. Sawediya, "Sadhandh."
62. Ibid., 75.
63. Jaaware, "Eating."
64. Ibid., 281.
65. Guru, "Review."
66. Ibid.
67. Valmiki, *Joothan*, x.
68. Booth, "Scent," 17.
69. Ibid., 6.
70. Ibid.

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