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Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara, eds. *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 238 p. ISBN: 9 7803 6721 8416 (pb). £34.99

- 1 Seventy years ago, under the aegis of B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the leader who inspired the Dalit movement,¹ caste discrimination and untouchability were abolished from the Indian constitution. Even though the rigid, ritual shunning of Dalits has indeed faded, a July 2020 article from *The Economist* still reported that “with dismal regularity news stories tell of higher-caste people maiming, raping or murdering Dalits for such slights as daring to sport a moustache, ride a horse or, worst of all, woo someone above their station.”² The persistence of caste discrimination in contemporary Indian society lies at the heart of *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*. Throughout this thought-provoking volume, the authors engage with the problems of a caste-ridden society which still fails to endow Dalits with mere humanity in many parts of the country. By the same token they shun the stereotype according to which castes belong to a pre-modern state and no longer prevail in a subcontinent seen as having fully embraced globalization.
- 2 After its birth in Maharashtra in the 1960s, Dalit literature spread in India and quickly became a political tool for their authors to dismiss their predestined and imposed identities. Its international academic assessment only emerged in the 2000s, and this

book purports to further this pioneering field. Based on conferences and events organized by a research network created by the editors between 2014 and 2016, “Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literature” (which received funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council), the volume acknowledges the urgent need for “postcolonial studies to engage with this emerging field in order to remain relevant and avoid inadvertently contributing to the silencing of this important and radical literature” (1). The excitement of witnessing an emerging field by scholars not initially trained in Dalit literature fuels the book and gives it an urgency and an emotional dimension that never however diminishes its theoretical engagement.

- 3 The book is divided into four parts; the first one gives voice to four prominent Dalit authors, the second explores the relationship between Dalit literature and gender, the third examines translation issues, and the final part tentatively paves the way for Dalit studies in other artistic forms.
- 4 In an inspiring interview, Bengali writer and former rickshaw-puller Manoranjan Byapari claims that caste and class are near-synonymous, and he explains how he came to develop an aesthetics of anger out of a growing dissatisfaction with testimony. Similarly, Bengali writer Kalyani Thakur Charal cannot separate her work as a writer from that of an activist, in her quest to expose the everyday realities of deprivation prevalent in her tribe. Cho. Dharman, a Tamil writer, deplores the infighting between castes and subcastes in South India and takes a strong stand against the idea of a community literature, as does Punjabi prose writer Des Raj Kali, whose works focus on the processes of domination at work in the wars his characters wage against hegemonic Hindus and Sikhs.
- 5 The second part of the book relies on the notion that caste is perpetuated through the imposition of caste endogamy on the body of women. Santosh Dash focuses on Gujarati short stories that conjure up, through social realism, a feudal order where Dalit women, even though they are considered despicable by upper caste men, are still seen as sexually available. Carmel Christi K.J. shows how the form of the autobiography is radically challenged by Dalit women writing in Malayalam. Subjected to organized sexual violence and reduced to being doubly marginalized objects, they prefer using the collective “we” that points to the public nature of their project. The plight of Dalit women is largely taken up by male writers, as seen in the essays by Gopika Jadeja and Shivani Kapoor, who look at literary projects purporting to reclaim the body of Dalit women against the dominance of upper caste males. Perhaps the most interesting study is to be found in the essay of Kanak Yadav about Sivakami, a female Tamil writer who wrote an autobiographical novel, but rewrote it a few years later by focusing only on “objective experience” in an extreme exercise in self-criticism. This essay seizes the uniqueness of the Dalit literary project, always on the verge of being shattered because the agenda it is trying to establish is so sensitive.
- 6 The third part is devoted to translations from Marathi to English, a language that was at the forefront of the fight against untouchability. Arun Prabha Mukherjee makes a case for maintaining Marathi words when they have no equivalent in English, contending that finding loose equivalents in English sabotages the very Dalit project. Maya Pandit shows that translation, by bringing to light the voice of the subaltern, carries a politics of alterity. The final part of the volume develops an argument put forward in the previous essays: the film, art and publishing industries being dominated by upper castes, they impose constraints on all Dalit projects. Ruchika Bhatia and

Devika Mehra focus on the potential of the graphic novel in terms of education and entertainment. Deeptha Achar shows that Dalit art is even more invisible than Dalit literature, and Chandra Sekhar subtly demonstrates how challenging it is to shoot a real Dalit film in a Telugu case study. These are less advanced contributions that would have benefited from stricter editing, yet they open up questions to be answered in future studies.

- 7 As a whole, the book is a formidable immersion into a field of study that is still at its outset. By showing that writers are fully aware of the forms they adopt to represent their plight, the volume proves that those texts, far from being mere anthropological material, can be assessed in accordance with aesthetic categories and not only in reference to the so-called authenticity of experience. Once this sterile debate is left aside, one can relate this literature to universal references and affiliations, to be seen in the solidarity those writers often express toward African-American literature or Aboriginal writing in Australia. It is no wonder that till recently the Dalit experience was nearly invisible outside India, so far removed is it from anything similar elsewhere, yet with sustainable effort, this wide-ranging, transnational inquiry will bring it to light and make sense of it. As stated in the moving preliminary statement by the editors, such a project required the fine work of emotionally-tuned, seasoned academics who deliberately chose to let Indian writers and scholars speak first-hand.

NOTES

1. The word Dalit, “broken people” in Marathi, is an umbrella term that refers to the former untouchable castes and Adivasis (tribal people).
 2. “No Escape,” *The Economist*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/07/23/even-as-india-urbanises-caste-discrimination-remains-rife>.
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AUTHORS

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