



THE DISMISSAL AND DEVALUATION OF DALIT EXPERIENCES: A FORM OF 'TESTIMONIAL INJUSTICE'

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Testimonial injustice, a facet of epistemic injustice, obstructs individuals from engaging in knowledge-sharing. It manifests through disregarding or downplaying a person's testimony, often rooted in biases linked to social identities like race or caste. In Indian Dalit literature, this injustice is evident as the voices and narratives of Dalit writers are frequently marginalised or invalidated by the dominant, upper-caste society. This study aims to delve into testimonial injustice's nuances, particularly its relevance within the realm of Indian Dalit literature, shedding light on the pervasive challenges faced by marginalised voices in asserting their truths.

Keywords: *Testimonial injustice, Dalit literature, credibility, epistemic harm, oppression*

Testimonial injustice is a concept introduced by Miranda Fricker in her book "Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing" (2007). It refers to situations in which individuals experience a credibility deficit in their capacity as knowledge bearers due to their social identity or membership in a marginalized group. It is a form of epistemic harm that occurs when a person is not given the credibility or respect that they are due as a result of prejudices or stereotypes associated with their social identity. "Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker 1). Testimonial injustice is thus distinct from other forms of epistemic harm, such as testimonial exclusion (i.e., being excluded from the opportunity to speak or share knowledge) or testimonial smothering (i.e., being interrupted or talked over), as it concerns the credibility of the speaker rather than their ability to speak. Fricker suggests that individuals or groups can experience (Hermeneutical) injustice, where their experiences are not comprehended due to a lack of conceptual frameworks available to them or others. This lack of understanding is due to a history of marginalization that has excluded certain groups from participating in activities that shape language and meaning-making, such as scholarship and journalism. It highlights the systemic nature of injustice, which arises from the way that language and meaning are constructed and passed down through different cultural and social institutions.

One of the key strengths of Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice is that it draws attention to the ways in which epistemic harm is intimately connected to social identity and power relations. She opines that "Testimonial injustice, then, occurs when a speaker who is in a position to know something is unjustly accorded a credibility deficit by a hearer, owing to prejudice on the hearer's part, either in relation to the speaker's social identity or in respect of some other aspect of the speaker's situation." (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). By highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing epistemic harm, Fricker's concept encourages us to rethink our assumptions about the objectivity of knowledge and the role of social identity in shaping our epistemic practices. As such, it continues to be a valuable resource for scholars working at the intersection of epistemology, social justice, and political theory.

Literary example of testimonial injustice can be found in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. The story of Sethe's traumatic experience is met with skepticism and disbelief by some of the other characters, who view her as unstable and unreliable due to her status as a Black woman and a former slave. As the narrator explains, "They forgot her except as a kind of personal unkindness, and the worse they treated her, the more ridiculous the lies became" (Morrison 210). In "Othello" Iago's testimony is given more weight and credibility by the others, despite being based on lies and prejudice, while Othello's testimony is dismissed and not taken seriously due to his race and status as an outsider in Venetian society. As he laments:

*I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,*

*When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice (Shakespeare 5.2.341-345).*

Celie, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, experiences testimonial injustice when she is repeatedly silenced and disbelieved by the men in her life. As she reflects on her experience, she notes: "I have always been a good listener, but never could get nobody to listen to me" (Walker 27). In *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, the character Hassan is falsely accused of stealing by his best friend Amir. Despite Hassan's protests of innocence, Amir's testimony is given more weight and credibility by the other characters in the novel. The impact of testimonial injustice on Hassan's life is profound, leading to feelings of betrayal and abandonment by those he trusted. In the essay "Stranger in the Village" James Baldwin notes:

In the United States, violence and hysteria always presuppose a lack of ideology, a lack of conscious and articulate dogma or intellectual framework; for the American people, it is precisely the absence of tradition - meaning the absence of a history which could be seriously confronted - which allows for myths and encourages the mindlessness (Baldwin 103).

Baldwin's experiences as a Black man in a white Swiss village illustrate the ways in which he is viewed as an outsider and his testimony is not given the same weight and legitimacy as that of the white residents. Virginia Woolf's notes in *A Room of One's Own* is worth quoting here:

Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics (Woolf 6).

She calls for a more inclusive literary culture that provides women with the resources and opportunities to write and share their stories, in order to challenge these biases and prejudices.

Dalit literature is a genre of literature that emerged in India in the mid-20th century as a response to the oppression and discrimination faced by Dalits in Indian society. The testimonies of Dalit writers are often dismissed or devalued by members of the upper-caste society, who see Dalits as inferior and unworthy of respect. This dismissal is often based on a lack of understanding or empathy for the experiences of Dalits, as well as a desire to maintain the status quo of caste-based hierarchy. That is, the upper caste failed to view Dalit as a credible witness, 'presumably in part due to racial bias'. This is a case of testimonial injustice, which occurs when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker 1). Ambedkar's testimony was often dismissed and devalued by members of the upper-caste Hindu society, who saw him as a threat to their privileged status and refused to acknowledge the validity of his experiences. Despite facing significant obstacles and opposition, Ambedkar continued to speak out and advocate for the rights of Dalits. Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki's memoir *Joothan* reads:

As I grew up, I became aware of the caste system and its workings...My testimony was dismissed because of my caste and social status, and I was told that I should know my place in society (Valmiki 15).

In *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, when Bakha tries to speak up for himself and challenge the caste system, he is met with indifference or hostility. For example, when Bakha asks a Brahmin priest why he is not allowed to enter the temple, the priest replies, "Because you are an untouchable and God does not like untouchables." Bakha's testimony about his own experiences is dismissed or belittled because of his caste identity. Namdeo Dhasal's poems often describe the brutal violence and discrimination faced by Dalits, but these testimonies are often ignored or silenced by the dominant culture. In the poem "Mother," Dhasal writes about a Dalit woman who is raped by upper-caste men:

*Mother, today they have defiled you
They have thrust their iron rods inside you
And left you bleeding on the street
They have spat on your face
And called you a whore (Mother).*

This testimony of sexual violence and dehumanization is powerful, but it is often dismissed or ignored. In her novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*, Kandasamy writes about her own experience of domestic violence. However, she has faced significant backlash and abuse for her work. As she describes in an article for *The Guardian*, she has been accused of 'lying,' 'exaggerating,' and 'making up stories,' and has faced online harassment and threats. Similarly, Y. S. Alone's novel *Sambhaji 1689* portrays the Maratha king Sambhaji as a hero, which has been seen as controversial by some upper-caste historians. As a result, he has faced legal charges and harassment from political groups. As he describes in an interview with *The Quint*, he has been accused of "distorting" history and "hurting sentiments," and has faced significant opposition to his work as a result (Alone). Malayalam author K.R. Meera's experiences are not given credibility and respect. In the novel *The Poison of Love* she writes: "Because I am a Dalit woman, my words are worth nothing. They can never be true, even if they are the truth itself" (Meera 103). This quote highlights the ways in which the narrator's testimony is devalued and dismissed because of her social identity as a Dalit woman. Krishna Sobti in her Dalit novel *The Book of Remembrances* claims:

In our country, when a lower caste man speaks, he is asked, 'Why do you speak so loudly? What is so important that you have to shout about it?' But when a man from an upper caste speaks, everyone listens quietly, even if he speaks in a whisper. We lower caste people are only listened to if we use force. Otherwise, nobody pays attention to what we say. (Sobti 176)

Manoranjan Byapari highlights the intersections of caste, class, and politics that have shaped his life and the lives of other Bengali Dalits. In the memoir, *Jibon Smriti*, he recounts his experiences growing up as a Dalit in rural Bengal. He describes the poverty, discrimination, and violence he faced, both from higher castes and from his own community. However, when he tries to share his story with non-Dalit intellectuals, he is often met with condescension or disbelief. They view him as a curiosity, rather than as a legitimate voice that deserves to be heard. The author's testimony is not being taken seriously due to his status as a Dalit. Despite his powerful and impactful writing, Byapari's work has faced significant challenges in reaching wider audiences. As Anirban Bhattacharya notes, "Byapari's work has been widely appreciated by readers, but he has remained largely ignored by mainstream literary circles" (Bhattacharya, 2019).

In the essay "Testimony as Empowerment: Revisiting Dalit Women's Autobiographical Narratives", Sharmila Rege argues that testimonial injustice has historically silenced the voices and experiences of Dalit women, and that this has had a profound impact on the way that Dalit literature has been perceived and studied. Rege writes:

Testimonial injustice has resulted in the erasure and marginalization of Dalit women's experiences and voices in dominant narratives of Indian history and literature. This has created a situation where the study and appreciation of Dalit literature has often been limited to its formal and aesthetic qualities, rather than its potential to challenge dominant norms and power structures (Rege 103).

In her essay "Reading and Writing Testimony: Dalit Women's Memoirs," Paulomi Chakraborty argues that testimonial injustice has significant implications for the way that Dalit women's memoirs are perceived and evaluated. According to Chakraborty, testimonial injustice has led to a situation where these works are often dismissed as mere personal accounts of suffering, rather than recognized for their potential to challenge dominant narratives of caste and gender oppression. Chakraborty's argument underscores the importance of recognizing the ways in which testimonial injustice can shape our understanding and appreciation of literature. By marginalizing certain voices and experiences, testimonial injustice can limit the scope of literary interpretation and critique, preventing us from fully engaging with the political and social implications of literary works. However, by recognizing and addressing testimonial injustice, we can also create a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape that values the diverse voices and experiences of all individuals and groups. This involves acknowledging the biases and prejudices that inform our reading practices, as well as actively seeking out and engaging with works of Dalit literature. Dalit works have often taken the form of autobiographical narratives, poetry, and fiction, and have played an important role in giving voice to those who have been historically excluded from the literary canon. In breaking with testimonial injustice, Dalit literature has also challenged traditional notions of 'good' literature with alternative aesthetics, often incorporating vernacular languages, dialects, and colloquialisms into their works. This has helped to create a literary form that is accessible and meaningful to a broader audience, including those who have been historically excluded and silenced. By giving voice to the space of historically silenced and marginalized, Dalit literature has helped to challenge dominant narratives of oppression and create a more inclusive and diverse literary canon. As K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu truly argue that Dalit literature is "a mode of cultural resistance that undermines the cultural norms of dominant society and fosters an alternative, oppositional cultural identity" (Satyanarayana and Tharu 421).

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