

# Producing Dalit Texts in English

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## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	4
Introduction .....	5
Conceptual Framework and Main Argument .....	6
What is Dalit Literature and literary politics? .....	8
Methodology.....	11
Theory of Emergent Literature .....	12
Brahminical Hegemony of Language .....	13
The influence of Hindi literature.....	14
The importance of English .....	16
The political importance of the dalit subject in Indian history .....	17
Economic aspects of literary production .....	19
Conclusion.....	20
Hegemonic forces revealed .....	22
The Hindi Dalit Literary Field.....	23
The Actors .....	25
The author.....	25
The international academic .....	26
The publishing house .....	27
Publishing and Marketing the Book.....	28
Conclusion.....	30
The end of critical innocence? .....	32
The political strategy of dreaming .....	33
Generational conflict .....	34
The issues of class and work .....	36
Class differences .....	36
Roles reversed: dalit boss, brahmin peon.....	36
Thwarted mobility.....	38
Conclusion.....	39
Primary Sources .....	43
Secondary Sources .....	43

## Abstract

In my thesis I examine the processes and forces that go into the production of dalit literary texts in English and its effect on discourses on dalit identity. As my case study I take the production of a collection of short stories in English, *Unclaimed Terrain*, by Ajay Navaria, a Hindi dalit writer who has come to prominence today. Through Raymond Williams' (1977) theory of literature I show the text as the product of historically situated determination, and the forces of hegemony, I show how the study dalit literature using Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural remains limited if it does not take into account the processes of brahmin hegemony and material production. This study demonstrates through the publishing process of the translated short story collection, *Unclaimed Terrain*, how the oppositional forces of hegemony and 'alternative hegemony' determine the extent to which new transgressive voices can create a literary text and can be incorporated into hegemonic practices. I demonstrate how the publishing process, the actors involved and the marketing strategies reveal the interplay of these forces. I show how apart from the author's 'authentic' dalit experience, other considerations, constrictions and forces come to play a role in producing dalit texts. At the same time, I also offer a reading of the short stories to identify the ways in which Navaria, a relatively new literary voice, opens up questions of dalit representation in literature. The conclusion is that Navaria's writing and his translated collection represent a particular moment in the continuous and indissoluble processes that exert their pressures and set the limits that enable the production of certain kind of literary discourses and practices.

## Introduction

My stories must be seen as the creative characterisations of my dreams—for convenience, you may call them stories, but to understand them fully, they should be approached as dreams. To have such dreams may be deemed as acts against society, religion and established norms. Could a writer stop dreaming for fear of religious diktats and fatwas? Should he abandon such dreams? Taking inspiration from the tradition of writers' fearlessness, I also chose and prepared to be brave.

It is no coincidence that the main characters or the dreaming protagonists of these stories are dalit. In today's society, it is inevitable that dalits are confronted by non-dalits at every step and every moment. Consequently it is very difficult for them to keep intact their self-respect and identity (asmita). After entering this labyrinth, dalits often forget the way out. Lost in this labyrinth they either try to become like non-dalits or it is expected of them to live and function according to the norms and standards set by non-dalits. How has the story been different in literature? (Navaria 2006, 5)<sup>1</sup>

These two paragraphs have been taken from the preface to the first collection of short stories, *Patkatha aur anya kahaniyan* (2006), by Ajay Navaria, a contemporary Hindi writer who writes in the dalit literary tradition. In these lines Navaria attempts to give meaning to and situate his writing in the dalit body of literature indicating how his writing stands apart but also connects to dalit literary politics. Such a signification is needed as his stories go beyond the accepted 'aesthetics' of dalit literature and violate many explicit rules of the by now established dalit literary canon. He first states that he dreams up his stories to blunt the edge of ample criticism that comes his way; then, he locates his own place in dalit literary politics by providing a way out of the labyrinth of social life. For his daring push against the boundaries he makes an intertextual reference to 'religious diktats and fatwas' which suggests he takes

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine.

legitimacy from Salman Rushdie and the latter's refusal to give up writing controversial literature in the face of religious pressure.

## Conceptual Framework and Main Argument

This thesis examines the particular moment in dalit literature occupied by the translation of Navaria's writing brought out in the English short story collection, *Uclaimed Terrain* (2013).

It is useful for us to look at this process through Raymond Williams's (1977) theory of literature as the product of the indissoluble social processes which exert their pressures and set the limits of literary creation. These processes are structured by the Gramscian concept of hegemony, originally developed to "understand the specific historical circumstances in which Italian fascism defeated socialism and communism" for the purpose of rebuilding politics (McGuian 1992, 64). The relevance to cultural studies of the concept of hegemony was worked out by Williams to mean "the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms of practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living" (1977, 110).

The incorporation of Gramsci's term had been named a fundamental moment for cultural studies by Hall (1980). The advantage of Williams' theory over Bourdieu's theory of cultural production can be seen in the place literature and its actual products occupy in the wider context of society. Bourdieu's theory remains especially limited for the context of counter-hegemonic literature because the literary field remains separated from the economic and political field (Williams 2003). While the literary field is integrated and affected by changes in the economic and political field, its cultural products and politics do not bear directly upon these wider fields. Therefore the impact of a counter-hegemonic culture and literature remains limited in society.

The concept of hegemony referring to "a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces" was to be understood as opposed to rule by directly political forms and effective coercion (Williams 1977, 108). In Williams' term dominant, hegemonic forms should not be seen as totally exclusive as "[a]t any

time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (1977, 113). While these oppositional politics and culture continue to be tied to the hegemonic, they contain residual cultural forms and can give rise to emergent cultural practices. Residual cultural practices mean those forms that have been formed in the past but continue to form an active part of the present, while emergent practices mean new meanings and values that arise from a rising class—in the case of this study, a rising class of dalit intellectuals. The alternative or oppositional politics of dalit counter-hegemonic culture are being turned into ‘alternative hegemony’. Which means “the practical connection of many different forms of struggle, including those not easily recognisable as and indeed not primarily ‘political’ and ‘economic’” (Williams 1977, 111). However, as I understand it, this alternative hegemony creates its own exclusion, in the case of dalit politics of class-, gender- and subcaste- based cultural differences, which forces the continuous re-examination of representation in literature.

In this thesis I argue that a study of the processes and actors involved in the publishing of Ajay Navaria’s *Unclaimed Terrain* will illuminate certain crucial aspects of the workings of the hegemonic in Indian society today. I argue that the publishing process of the book should be seen as an obvious step in the struggle against brahminical hegemony, but also that it cannot simply be seen in relation to it. The texts and the production process are significantly affected by the ‘alternative hegemony’ established by the literary politics of dalit literature. These processes, in turn, affect questions of identity framed in dalit literature, which may arise from and affect dalit identity politics. These questions require the debates around identity and representation to remain in process and continue to be questioned.

In this study, I approach the English edition of Navaria’s stories and the particular moment it represents in the dynamics of dalit literature from three different aspects. In the first chapter I lay out the historical and conceptual factors that limit and facilitate the writing of the short stories and their translation. In the second chapter I lay out the publishing process, stressing the aspects of production, and the role of the producers that shapes the book. Finally, in the third chapter I offer an analysis of the stories looking for ambiguities of literary representation. Through this analysis, I break with the predominant mode of

engaging with a literary work, as a finished object and underscore the processes from which a work emerges, and, at the same time, hint at what is set into motion by such a work.

## What is Dalit Literature and literary politics?

To understand better the literary context in which Ajay Navaria situates himself, we first have to turn to dalit literature and the meaning of what I would term dalit literary politics. Dalit literature means a body of literature, invariably produced by Dalits, that aims to represent the pain of caste oppression. A by now established body of literary criticism written both in the Indian vernacular languages—of which Omprakash Valmiki's *Dalit sahitya ka saundaryashastra* (2001) is one important example—and in English by international academics (Gajrawala 2013, Brueck 2014, Hunt 2014) sets out the rules and limits of dalit literature. The ubiquitous topic of dalit literature is the caste oppression that affects the lowest section of the caste system in India: people who used to be called untouchables in pre-independence India. While the Constitution of India, which came into effect on 26 January 1950, abolished the caste system and outlawed untouchability, dalits continue to face discrimination in various walks of life. A rich body of literature highlighting different forms of casteism and caste oppression emerged first in the 1970s following the Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra, in the language Marathi. As the political influence of the movement grew, it spawned a number of other movements in the various vernacular languages across India, among them in Hindi.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Dalit Panthers were a militant movement inspired by the writings and figure of Dr Ambedkar, the preeminent political figure of the dalit movement, the Black Panthers in the US and Marxism. The movement was formed to protect villagers from caste atrocities, even through violence if needed (see Jaoul 2012, Murugkar 1991). In addition to direct action, they also produced a rich body of poetry, short stories and autobiographies, filled with rage against brahminical society and inequality. They adopted the term dalit, which means broken or oppressed, as a term of self-respect denoting former untouchables, in alternative to the stateist use of Scheduled Castes or the Gandhian term harijans (children of god) which they deemed patronising (see Ilaiah 1996). In this essay I use all caste names in lower case according to the style increasingly used by newspapers, magazines and publishing houses. The refusal to capitalise has been initiated as a political move to reduce the determining importance of caste names to identity and also to avoid the clutter of capital letters in writings full of caste names. Dalits are outside of the varna system (caste system as enshrined in Hindu sacred texts) but form part of the jati system, which encompasses the cacophony of innumerable endogamous communities, called by the Portuguese term castes and subcastes, across India.

The influence of the Dalit Panther movement continues to be felt in literature. Hindi dalit literature shares its political imperative in representing the oppression and atrocities affecting rural dalits that continue unabated. These atrocities are known by the place names where they happen and their lists are invoked in fiction and non-fiction accounts as proof of the persistence of caste in India. The gang-rape of two dalit girls in Badaun on 27 May 2014, of which spine-chilling pictures were circulated in both print and social media, adds to the ever-lengthening list. Anand Teltumbde in *The Persistence of Caste* (2010) unpacks the processes that resulted in the rape-and-murder Khairlanji incident of 2006, where the material and educational advance of a dalit family angered the dominant castes and led to unspeakable violence to be unleashed upon the family.<sup>3</sup> What makes these horrors even worse is the legal aftermath of the atrocities when perpetrators of caste violence walk free because of the unwillingness of the judicial system to carry through its laws against caste violence—laid out in the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) when the accused are savarnas (Roy 2014).

Given the severity of caste violence and discrimination, one of the main questions occupying literary critics is who can legitimately write about them (Gajrawala 2013, Brueck 2014, Hunt 2014). The argument goes that dalit literature has to be written by dalits, because only dalits can understand their own pain and the community's pain and they are the ones who can represent them appropriately. Dalit literature stems partly from the wish to enhance the visibility of the atrocities committed and the more insidious persistence of caste discrimination against dalits that are and have been the lot of dalits across India throughout history. That only dalits can write dalit literature is widely held belief; however, it is not by any measure uncontested. Ajay Navaria one of the protagonists of this study for example expresses his discontent and dangers of such a categorisation in “Udhar ke logon ke yatrae” (The journeys of people

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<sup>3</sup> Dominant castes are not equal to upper castes or commonly called savarnas—denoting those within the ritual caste hierarchy: brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras. They come from the maratha jati cluster close to dalits and still count among the shudra touchable castes. Teltumbde in *The Persistence of Caste* demonstrates how the sharpest caste conflict plays out between these so called middle castes and dalits and how these are based on a combination of economic and social/ritual factors. However, the dominance of the shudras only plays out in certain local contexts, in others their situation and status is closer to the dalits (Ilaiah 1996).

beyond, 2010) where he advocates taking into consideration the art of the writer as much as the political message included in stories.

Another question that preoccupies critics is what constitutes dalit literature. Dalit writers have come under continuous critiques for their non-adherence to literary aesthetics as defined by hegemonic literary practices in the vernacular languages. To counter such criticism, dalit writers and critics have come up with a body of literary criticism that defines a new aesthetics. The category 'dalit consciousness' is a defining feature of this aesthetics. Dalit consciousness, as spelt out by Omprakash Valmiki in *Dalit sahitya ka saundaryashastra* (The Aesthetics of Dalit literature 2001), includes a political orientation that is Ambedkarite, anticapitalist and antibrahminist. It is also contra established aesthetics, contra-hierarchical and privilege, and anti-traditionalist political stance (cited by Brueck 2006). The presence or absence of such political awareness coupled with a sense of collective and revalued collective identity (encompassing various dalit castes and their members) are used, as Brueck (2006) suggests, to evaluate dalit literature. Thus the element of a political consciousness reevaluates the reason for writing about the atrocities, from simple accounts to a prompt toward action.

For the success of this project raising questions about dalit identity is essential, as the narratives that help dalits figure out their position become the basis for action similarly to the narrative identities of woman and minority groups spelt out by Sommers (1994). The passages from Navaria's novel, cited in the epigraph to this chapter, also point toward the importance of literary narratives to provide a steadying point on which people can draw on for both individual and group action to get out of the labyrinth of social life. Thus dalit literature, instead of a simple recounting of atrocities and discrimination, becomes a 'literature of action' (Valmiki cited in Brueck 2014, 64). In this way, through suggesting modes of consciousness, living and action, these texts also become vehicles of a positive collective identity construction for a group with devalued identity.

## Methodology

In this thesis I rely on my memories of the transforming experience of giving birth to a book. I worked as an editor at Navayana, “India’s first and only publishing house to focus on the issue of caste from an anticaste perspective” (Navayana website), between September 2012 and July 2013. During this time I was the part of the production of many books apart from *Unclaimed Terrain*, and this experience will never allow me again to see any text as a finished product. This is how dalit literature became a personal issue for a non-dalit, non-Indian student like me. As I did not take any notes, I have to rely on the incompleteness of memory and I assume that whatever was important from the publishing process had remained with me. In addition to the memory of the immediate experience, I also rely on the ample amount of secondary sources that had been written about dalit literature. To complete the picture, I also reflect on three excerpts from the stories “Sacrifice” (2004), “Yes Sir” (2009) and “Scream” (2006) contained in the book. For the analysis of the stories I fall back on those times that we spent together discussing aspects of publishing with the author, the publisher and another employee, Raju, both at the office and at events at which Navaria was present. Although the analysis as put down and solidified in this thesis is entirely mine, with all its faults, it cannot be separated from the collective understanding that we formed during those meetings. Given my involvement in the production process, I had been unable to study dalit and non-dalit reading practices, which limits my findings. Best I could do was to ask Anand, the publisher of Navayan, who the targeted readership of Navaria’s book may be, but all he could do was guess that it may be a small middle-class readership among both non-dalits and dalits.

## Chapter 1 – The Pressures and limits of history

*“Is there a way between dalit literature and Hindi literature?” asked an eager young man in the audience of a small book reading session at event series organized by Yodakin at the World Book Fair, New Delhi, in 2013.*

*“I am the way,” came the answer from Ajay Navaria.*

*Yodakin used to be a bookshop ran by the independent publishing house Yoda that promoted and sold books by other independent publishers until it closed down in the summer of 2013. At the world book fair it ran a week-long programme with authors and publishers reading from their books at the Authors’ Corner in the hall organised by NBT (the National Book Trust of India). Navayana was also invited to present a couple of its authors and I tagged along to help promote our newly published short story collection, Unclaimed Terrain.*

## Theory of Emergent Literature

Ajay Navaria’s response, saying he is the way, provides a curious instance in which an author explicitly situates himself both in and out of both Hindi and dalit literary traditions, which are seen as opposed to each other. In this section I will examine the literary, political and economic factors, in and out of which dalit literature situates itself, to show the historical processes that play into what Raymond Williams (1977) talks of as “determination”. For Williams, literature, as an important part of culture, is the integral part of indissoluble historical social processes that are constituted by and constitutive of culture. He considers the close interplay between different elements of these processes that he identifies as material production of commodities, the formal composition of language and literature, and the social interaction which in turn is a constituted and constitutive part of the former. Such an approach calls for an examination of historical hegemonic forces and their contestation through dalit literary politics and the economic relationships in which they are situated.

In this chapter I will first talk about the brahminical hegemony on language which pervades Indian society. In this context I lay out the pressures and limits exerted by Hindi literature, as this is regarded as the most relevant determinant by studies on dalit literature (Gajarawala 2013, Hunt 2014, Brueck 2014). As part of the brahminical hegemony on language I also discuss the position and role of English in the postcolonial cultural and economic context, with special reference to the rising importance of the Anglophone Indian novel in the recent decades. I will then talk about the political significance of the dalit subject. Finally, I will provide a short sketch of the economic background of the publishing scene in India, with special reference to the development of the particular genre of the short story.

## Brahminical Hegemony of Language

In the classic political tract, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva, Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Kancha Ilaiah lays out the way in which the lives and cultures of dalits and lower-shudras differ from that of the *savarna* Hindus. He describes the differences in religious practices and the gods that are revered, the way in which children are brought up to learn the skills necessary to fulfil the position assigned to them by the caste hierarchy and other everyday practices and life rituals. His notes on the language used by these communities are particularly interesting. He describes the stranglehold of the *savarna* Hindus on the valued learned language. Ilaiah (1995) shows the contradiction behind such an order by asserting that the dalits and shudras possess a rich language ‘structured around production’. Books, especially religious books, are not allowed to enter the household of the dalit and lower-shudra castes, and they are prohibited to learn. But even after the abolition of untouchability when the doors of schools open up after independence, they find that the textbooks are written in the language of the *savarnas* and only carry their history and mythologies. This severity of the situation is enhanced by the teachers who, Ilaiah says, “hated us to our faces that it was because of the evil time—because of *kaliyuga* that [they were] being forced to teach ‘Shudras’ like us” (Ilaiah, 12). While Ilaiah’s accounts are specific and come from his personal experiences growing up the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, similar

narratives had emerged across India. It is from such deep experiences of brahminical hegemony that the alternative hegemonic forms of dalit politics and literature emerge.

### The influence of Hindi literature

Brahminical hegemony and the struggles against it are well demonstrated in dalit writers' intervention in the Hindi literature. While on the Indian scene the wider Hindi literary practice should be seen rather as a residual form in Williams' typology, as it continues to lose out to English (Dalmia 2003), it still carries the mark of dominance in relation to Hindi dalit writing. Hindi dalit writers and critics situate themselves most consciously and immediately against Hindi literature, especially Premchand (1880–1936). He was not only the founder of the socially conscious Progressive Writers' Movement,<sup>4</sup> but as part of the larger political agenda to paint a more realist picture of Indian society he was the first writer to write untouchables into his stories (Gajarawala 2013). In Premchand's stories dalit characters appear as wretched creatures devoid of their humanity due to the degraded conditions in which they are forced to live. They are not depicted with any individual agency with which they could fight against *savarna* oppression. In the story "Kafan" (Shroud xxxx), which is perhaps the story most loathed by dalit critics, father and son are sitting outside the house while the daughter-in-law is dying in labour inside. When she dies the men go and drink away the money that they collect for the shrouds, and this exposes the callousness that society has caused in them.

The inclusion of a paraphrase of Premchand's stories by Laura Brueck, the translator, in *Unclaimed Terrain*, have to be seen in light of this argument. In Navaria's "Hello Premchand" ("Uttarkatha" 2008/2013) Premchand's devaluated characters appear, including the ones from "Kafan", as belonging to the same village and helping each other in the miseries that befall them. Brueck writes, "Navaria's story is a critical appraisal of the treatment of caste in modern Indian literature, a literal re-writing of literary history and rethinking of literary possibility as well as a recasting of the supposed inevitability of caste identities in modern India" (Brueck 2014, 14).

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<sup>4</sup> Progressive Writers' Movement in India

Although analysts of dalit literature are keen to point out how opposition to Hindi literature defines the aesthetics and subject matter of dalit literature and marks it out as unique and important, I argue that the forces of negation are far from the only influences. Ajay Navaria, like other dalit writers, has to work within the material sphere of the Hindi literary language, which is determined and developed by the body of writers who have written before them and also by those who continue to write presently, even if dalit literary practice continues to press against these forms. The thematic choices of the wider Hindi practice also determine the literary practice of dalit writers. One example is the way in which accounts of the city resignify the experiences of living in the metropolis. Navaria continues the literary practice of *savarna* Hindi writers Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar, Nirmal Verma and Rajendra Yadav who focus on the internal tensions caused by the alienated city dweller. Except in Navaria's work, elements of alienation (see Roadarmel's thesis 1969), following other dalit writers, have been reevaluated to have more positive than negative meanings. In dalit writing the city becomes a place where social ties are broken up and anonymity provides an escape from caste oppression, even if more subtle forms of caste based discrimination is still prevalent.

The inclusion of dalit literary voices in mainstream Hindi literary spaces was set in motion by Rajendra Yadav, the reputed Hindi writer and the editor of the monthly literary magazine *Hans*.<sup>5</sup> He explained to Hunt (2014) that the inclusion of women's and dalit voices was an essential move for the advancement of Hindi literature. This may also be a move that widens the base of readership of for a Hindi literature that is losing out to English. Its readership also remains narrower compared to other vernacular languages such as Malayalam or Bengali because of lower literacy rates in Hindi. This inclusion is also made possible through the fostering of dalit writing in certain genres such as the autobiography and the short story which are more suited to be included among the more mainstream voices of Hindi literature.

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<sup>5</sup> *Hans* was the first mainstream literary magazine to include stories by dalit writers in the early 1990s (Hunt 2014).

## The importance of English

Hindi is far from the only dominant literary force that asserts its influence on Hindi dalit literature. Recent years have seen the rise of the Anglophone Indian novel on the world literary scene. Such a rise had been partly the effect of the rising importance of English and the Anglophone novel in India, but also of Indian writers gaining fame on the world literary market (Sadana 2012). Although the two can be seen mutually informing. Literary authors such as Arundhati Roy (1997), Kiran Desai (2006) and Aravind Adiga (2008) have been recipients of the Booker prize. The last ten years has also seen the appearance of writers such as Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi who are hugely popular and whose books sell in the millions. Such an interest on the world stage in the Anglophone Indian novel may be explained by the rising, by now almost hegemonic position of postcolonial theory, which may have influenced the reception of writing that presently emerges from the former colonies, many of which should not be categorised as postcolonial literature anymore. Homi Bhabha explains that “[w]here, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature” (2004, 17). It is such an interest in those voices that emerge from the ‘interstices’ of society that urge S. Anand, the publisher of Navayana and *Unclaimed Terrain*, to press for a more international recognition of dalit writing, which would necessitate further translations.

The Anglophone novel is not exempt from criticism for not incorporating politically conscious dalit characters with individual agency. S. Anand in “Lighting Out for the Territory” (2011), a survey of dalit literature across India, lashes out against non-dalit English language writers who portray dalit characters while they fail to endow them with a political consciousness and to situate them in the dalit political movement that he demonstrates has been going strong since the beginning of the twentieth century. He cites such examples as Manu Joseph’s scheming dalit protagonist, Rohinton Mistry’s portrayal of the

travails of a chamar<sup>6</sup> family and Arundhati Roy's Velutha who has to die for his transgressive love with a savarna woman.

Such considerations modify the relations laid out between dominant, residual and emergent as by Williams (1997). He argues that residual and emergent cultural forms need to be seen in their relation to the dominant. However, in the multilingual context of Indian society an emergent literary form using the language of the residual Hindi literary form does not have a direct relationship of subordination with the dominant language. This is further complicated if we acknowledge that English is not a dominant language in terms of numbers, as large sections of society which only use a vernacular and have limited knowledge of English are excluded from it. However, the greatest issue lies in the observation that neither the English nor the Hindi literary spheres can be exclusively identified as the dominant cultural form of brahminical hegemony. This means that establishing an 'alternative hegemony' in terms of literature for dalits means fighting a battle on multiple linguistic fronts.

### The political importance of the dalit subject in Indian history

The political importance of the dalit subject in north India is generally portrayed to have started with the dalit movement led by Ambedkar in the first part of the twentieth century. Dr B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was born into a mahar untouchable family in Maharashtra. His family gained some importance and education in the employment of the British army and their son went on to become one of the first untouchables to gain an education. Upon his return with doctorates from Columbia University, New York, and the London School of Economics, he started his political agitation, making “educate, agitate, organise” the political slogan of the dalit movement. He believed in principles such as one–man one–vote and thus invested his energies in working for dalit rights with a legal and parliamentary-political system. Towards this, he was involved and negotiated with the British during the colonial period, and went on to head the drafting committee of the Indian constitution during the post-independence period when he put

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<sup>6</sup> Chamar is a north Indian dalit subcaste whose traditional occupation is to prepare the skin of animals, mark them as untouchables.

in place the policy of reservation (as affirmative action is known in India). India's reservation policy ensures that the Scheduled Castes (as dalits are known in official parlance) have a share in state-run educational institutions and state employment in proportion to their share in the overall population, which comes to an all-India 15 percent (Zelliot 2013). While this policy has been operational since 1950, it gained national importance when V.P. Singh decided to implement the suggestions of the Mandal Commission, in 1990. As a consequence the reservation system was revised to include another category besides the Scheduled Castes, that of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). This move elicited dramatic protests from savarna students leading to the self-immolation of many in protest against the policy (Dirks 2001).

While these protests were instrumental in giving the caste issue nationwide importance, Appadurai (1993) understands these as the result of the play of 'numbers' in the colonial imagination. He argues that the importance of numbers and record-keeping of the British administration left a long and lasting influence on how the Indian state looks at its diverse population. Although he ignores more than hundred years of history in between the height of colonial rule and the rise of caste politics in present-day India, the role of numbers cannot be discounted. One of the greatest threats posed by the Ambedkar-led movement was the loss of a large electorate to the Indian National Congress. Ambedkar, in opposition to Gandhi, claimed that untouchables constituted a separate body from *savarna* Hindus who, through the practice of untouchability, disowned them and therefore had to be treated a minority group. This meant that, like the Muslims, they deserved separate electorates. After the Second Round Table conference the British granted such separate electorates. However, Gandhi went on a fast unto death resulting in the infamous Poona Pact of 1931 where Ambedkar had to give up the promise of separate electorates and agree to reservations in the political system (see Anand 2014). The claim that untouchables were not part of the Hindu population threatened with the loss of votes on a massive scale for the Congress. This conflict has continued to exert its influence not only in the dalit imagination, but also in a context where vote banks came to define the outcome of Indian politics and which has seen the rise of a dalit party (Jaffrelot 2003).

Such intensifying political pressures coming from the ‘edge of hegemony’ exert their influence in literature as well. A rising political class of dalit political forces has to be contended with in cultural politics as well. This view is beautifully expressed by Rajendra Yadav when he says, “[i]n this new political and social scenario, these forces [i.e., the lower castes, women and minorities] are unstoppable ... So if we want to survive in the Hindi world, we have to identify ourselves with the rising forces” (quoted in Hunt 2014). It should come as no surprise that the issue of democracy is a common topic in Hindi dalit writing.

### Economic aspects of literary production

The economic aspects of literary production are the most often excluded from the discussion of literature even though they are part of the constituting factors. In 1991, Rajiv Gandhi’s government started the process of trade liberalisation that ended the planned economy of the Nehruvian era. This move had resulted in the entry of multinational corporations into the Indian market and a shift in lifestyles towards increased consumption. The introduction of free market economy, and the embrace of capitalism and consumerism by the state and the middle classes, made an impact on dalit literature too. However, palpable changes took their time since many of the dalit writers, who started writing in the 1990s, were relating their experiences from before market liberalisation. The changes in the economy hardly exerted any influence on the first wave of Hindi dalit autobiographies that came out in the 1990s, such as Joothan etc. However, their impact can be clearly discerned in Navaria’s writing. The trope of passive bodies caught in the cycle of a consumerist society is a recurrent one in his stories. Access to consumer products is becoming increasingly the mark of social status which is used to counteract the mark of untouchability.

The economic situation is also important to situate the publishing process. The Hindi literary scene had been dominated by family-owned publishing houses, which in the recent years had found more and more profitable to publish dalit writing (Hunt 2014). These publishing houses make a one-off payment to writers, but do not pay royalties after the copies sold, so they can make a considerable amount of money out of popular writers. The English publishing scene had been more exposed to the vicissitudes of

international capital. Since the 1990s more and more international trade publishers had moved into the Indian market, the most recent example being Bloomsbury which opened office in New Delhi in 2013, to add to the list of Penguin, Hachette, HarperCollins, Pan Macmillan (Picador) and such like. Their move should also be seen in light of the growing importance of English and the ‘Anglophone’ literary genre. In the cultural and economic atmosphere of ever growing influence of English the number of independent English publishing houses had also increased. However, dalit literary voices and cultural producers remain severely underrepresented in the publishing scene. Navayana is one of these independent publishing houses, struggling to survive in the shadow of multinational companies, while aiming to increase the representation of dalit writers and the discussion of caste issues in English.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I focused on processes that appear to be the most important of forces *determining*, in Williams’ term, dalit literature. These forces exert pressure and set the limits for not only such dalit writers as Ajay Navaria, but also on the work of Laura Brueck, the translator of the *Unclaimed Terrain* and on the publishing and translation processes that I witnessed first hand. The difficulty with a theory that emphasises the interplay of numerous indissoluble processes is that it is impossible to include all forces that bear upon the subject of the case study. My account, therefore, remains limited for both lack of space and consideration, for example in exploring the connection between the type of literature published by independent publishing houses in comparison to the output of multinationals. The relationships between dalit, Hindi and English literary forms and their relationship to brahminical hegemony should not be taken as solidified. These forces and processes as they appear through this chapter are far from finished and continue to be formed by and form, at the present into the future, the products that they push into shape. And these cultural products, in turn, continue to feed back into the social processes, becoming part of the whole indissoluble process of culture, politics and economic production as Williams argues.

## Chapter 2 –The production process

“How long will we continue to look towards the forums and magazines of the savarnas? We should establish our own forum” ... Mohandas Naimisharay says as the main speaker on the Forum for Democratic Opinions. Rajendra Yadav, [...] Linda Hess, Laura Brueck, Heinz Werner Wessler, [...] Jayprakash Kardam, Chandrabhan Prasad, [...]and] Kanwal Bharti [...]are also present on the stage. Rajendra Yadav is guffawing loudly. The smoke from his pipe is floating around his dark glasses. This Rajendra has transformed even the genteel literary world to his own likeness. He did well. [...] “Dalit and women’s literature are the future,” thunders Rajendra Yadav. “The big deal is not life experience, but understanding,” Vishwanath Tripathi interrupts Rajendra Yadav. “It is very worrisome for an enlightened person to remain ignorant of the way the caste system scorches dalits ... economic freedom is a constant freedom,” roars Kanwal Bharti. “We will have to fight for economic freedom as much as for social deliverance.” “I came to understand Indian reality in its entirety through Kabir’s poetry,” says Linda Hess in clear Hindi, despite her foreign accent. Laura Brueck is smiling.

This dream sequence from the novel *Udhar ke log* (People of the other side, 2008, 127) by Ajay Navaria, introduces the different actors and conflicting lines of argument that shape the direction of dalit literary practice. The statement of Naimisharay, an established dalit author, reflects the pressure for the dalit literary practice to turn in on itself, while Rajendra Yadav, editor of the journal *Hans*, expresses his view of the importance of dalit literature to the Hindi literary mainstream, opening up the debate. Tripathi’s remark questions the rule that says only dalits can understand and represent dalit experiences, while Bharti’s remark points to a demand for a move away from identity politics towards a struggle for redistribution. Among the people present, there are dalit writers, Hindi writers and critics as well as foreign scholars of dalit literature and their voices resound equally forcefully. Towards the end of the sequence Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar walks in from among the audience, appearing as a *mahapurush* (Great Man)—his shoes are shining and he is wearing a three-piece suit. At his apparition the entire audience

stands up and a group of children sing his praises, “Babasaheb Ambedkar amar raho,” “Long live, Babasaheb Ambedkar!”

This description bears a strong resemblance to that provided by Sarah Beth Hunt of what she calls the dalit ‘autobiographical’ field based on its predominant genre. However, the scene described here appears self-sufficient and disconnected from wider processes—it does not seem to be moving anywhere. While Naimisharay’s comment characterises the voices within the field who are in favour of intensifying the self-sufficiency of dalit literary practices, the challenge they intend and indeed pose to brahminical hegemony also requires an examining of the forces that press against established literary practices. In this chapter, I explore a recent move in this direction—that of the publication of dalit writing in English translation—which seems like a necessary step in challenging brahminical hegemony but is not without its contentions.

### Hegemonic forces revealed

Williams’ elaboration of dominant, residual and emergent literary forms is significant in showing the complexity of culture in its “historically varied and variable elements” (1977, 121). Such a consideration calls for the examination of the relations between different literary forms in the English, Hindi and dalit fields. I identify dalit literature as an emergent literary practice as it was set in motion by a new class of dalit intellectuals and writers to represent the relatively subordinate but irrepressible political forces and voices. This literary practice is in a relatively subordinated position of the residual Hindi literary practice and the rising dominance of English. The English language translation of Navaria’s short stories provides a case study through which limits and pressures of the dominant and hegemonic literary practices of English are revealed. Given the severe underrepresentation of dalits in the cultural industry, and as a consequence in publishing, Navayana, a brahmin-run publishing house strives to carry through the literary-political project of de-brahminising the English language cultural sphere in India.

The contradiction of such a venture is well expressed by S. Anand's the blogpost "Ambedkar: Universal as the Sun" published on the Navayana website. Anand says "Navayana is a 'necessary historical mistake'" which is aimed at its own destruction—at the "annihilation of caste" which would bring about a society in which there is no need for brahminical patronage of dalit culture. This statement is significant in light of the criticism that Navayana received in recent times for being run by someone from the privileged castes from a faction of the dalit movement. I argue that this criticism stems from the pressures of the 'alternative hegemony' that the dalit movement strives to establish. While I consider the publishing endeavour of Navayana important, in this chapter I show that the attempt to further the counter-hegemonic dalit cause in English is not without its contentions and cannot exempt itself from the pressures and limitations of the hegemonic.

### The Hindi Dalit Literary Field

In an excellent study of the Hindi dalit literary field, *Hindi Dalit Literature: The Politics of Representation* (2014), Hunt identifies the main actors: dalit writers on their way from an impoverished childhood to a middle class position; two non-dalit 'gatekeepers' into the wider Hindi literary field, Rajendra Yadav and Ramanika Gupta; and a few other Hindi writers and critics, who allow and push for the recognition of dalit writing in the wider Hindi field. According to Hunt, the aim of the dalit literary field is to "both question and actively contest dominant cultural representations of what it means to be an Indian citizen" (2014, 135). "In this sense, Hindi Dalit writers are attempting to redefine what it means to be middle class in north India by incorporating the element of caste identity, an act which directly counters the middle-class claim to a 'casteless' modernity since the time of Nehru" (Hunt 2014, 135). The main symbolic capital that dalit writers need to master is being dalit and therefore authentic representatives of dalit lives, maintaining ties within the dalit network and with gatekeepers into the wider Hindi literary field, and having an autobiography published by a 'mainstream' Hindi publishing house.

Imagining of the dalit literary field in such a way also forces her to separate out the field of dalit politics from dalit literature and argue that they are interrelated but operate based on different rules. Such a move

carries the danger of depoliticising the dalit literary practice. This also fails to take into account the intimately political aspect of writing literature for dalit writers, which is best expressed by Navaria when he says, “For me literature becomes the bridge between personal and social. The writer can cross over from one to the other through this bridge and can bring the social closer to himself” (Navaria 2006, 5). The portrayal of actors in the literary field vying for positions also makes the struggle for political aims an indirect result of the inner struggle of the field.

While Hunt carefully and precisely demonstrates how the dynamics of the dalit literary field is closely tied up and is invested in the wider Hindi literary field, she gives no mention of the impact by the wider English cultural field and its intersections with international academia. Rashmi Sadana has demonstrated in *English Heart, Hindi Heartland* (2012) the importance of the indigenised English literary world in India. Sadana also shows the way in which the English cultural field intersects with the Hindi literary field. Thus the former’s influence on Hindi dalit writing, which can be seen embedded in the latter, cannot be ignored. In Hunt’s (2014) account, demonstrative of the hermetic nature of Bourdieu’s theory and its focus on the actor’s position, there is no mention of the entire gamut of literary and linguistic practice that comes with being situated in either the Hindi or the Anglophone literary tradition (see Gajarawala 2012).

Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s focus on the individual actors involved in literary practice and the consideration of their personal professional politics to assert their influence on a given field improves our understanding how Williams’ (1977) indissoluble cultural processes play out and channelled in the focused case of the production of a book. Williams’ theory also provides a wider view which become necessary for locating actors coming from different fields, such as the international academic whose position in her own field is tied up with actors and processes in the dalit field. While William’s insistence on taking language and literature as material manifestations of these processes requires a study of the book production itself and what it means for the future.

## The Actors

### The author

The importance of the author cannot be played down even if focusing on the larger context of literary production. I do not aim to lessen the achievements and skills of the author by describing the amount of work other than creativity that goes into the production of a book and by extension into literature. Ajay Navaria may signal the arrival of a new generation of writers, whose aims go beyond a programmatic recording and demonstrating of caste discrimination and the pathways into education and white-collar employment. His position is best revealed through his account of the editorial process behind the dalit special issue in *Hans* (2004). Navaria was chosen at the start of the ascendance of his career to be the co-editor of the special issue alongside the then more established Sheoraj Singh ‘Bechain’. While the work first went well and the two authors worked closely in the selection process, the latter took offence when the young Navaria expressed his contention that they should be looking for literary quality of the received text and not the identity of the authors. Eventually, Navaria was pressed to comply by Rajendra Yadav who assuaged Navaria’s objections by saying, “your talent will not be suppressed” (Navaria 2010).

During the day, Navaria is a professor of Hindu ethics at the Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi—a considerable achievement from a dalit who historically have been barred from engaging with sacred Hindu texts. At night, when he conceives of an idea, he cannot rest until he writes it down (Buncombe 2010). Hunt (2014) depicts him as an up-and-coming, young writer among more established members of the dalit literary circle, which teaches appropriate modes of expression to younger members through extended discussions on issues affecting dalits as democratic citizens of India. Hunt explains his prominent position despite his young age by the readymade “access to the wealth of literary contacts and publishing opportunities that the established members of the group have cultivated over the past several decades” (2014, 143). However, by today the centre of the circle may have shifted to include Navaria at its centre. He had been appointed in October 2013 as the head of the Dalit Lekhak Sangh one of the two dalit literary forums conferring significant authority on him and his writings. Such a shift, as I

demonstrate in this chapter, may have to do with more than just simply either his good positioning or his well-crafted fiction. For Navaria the publishing of his short stories in English translation, with ringing endorsements on the cover from established Anglophone writers like Arundhati Roy and Mohammed Hanif, helps to improve his position vis-à-vis other writers.

### The international academic

An important actor determining the making of dalit authors' prestige is the literary critic and the academic, either foreign or operating both in the Indian and international domain. Bourdieu points out that one of the fundamental criteria for art is that it would be recognised as such (1993). In the context of dalit literature this process works on several levels, with the appreciation of indigenous critics and international academics. In the case of dalit writing, the role of indigenous critics and international academics is not exhausted by recognising certain texts as literatures, they are also engaged in the political project of creating a language for the wider audience through which dalit texts can be read and decoded. At the same time, the foreign academic also facilitates these literary texts to reach an international audience, however limited reach academia may have.

It was a PhD candidate from the University of Texas, Laura Brueck, from whom the idea of what came to be *Unclaimed Terrain* originated. She offered her translation for publication at Navayana. She is now assistant professor of Indian literature at the Northwestern University, Chicago, which makes her an influential legitimiser and promoter of dalit literature, which in turn helped her achieve this position. The importance of the presence of the foreign academic can be seen from Navaria's decision to include her in the dream sequence heading this chapter. In turn, Brueck also needs to fulfil the role of providing the language in which Navaria can be read on an international level by those who have no immediate knowledge of India or the dalit situation. The translation of the seven short stories can be seen as a partial fulfilment of this role. However, constructing a discourse around dalit literature in her PhD also informs the selection of the short stories included in the book, *Unclaimed Terrain*. As her selection was driven by

an academic project, she will have included those stories which best demonstrate and underline her work and which can be brought into conversation with other work that has been done on dalit writing.

### The publishing house

There is one significant omission in the dream sequence quoted above as there is in most secondary literature on dalit writings. The absence of the English language publishing house specialised in publishing dalit literature and writings on caste issues from an anticaste perspective was also omitted from Hunt's (2014) otherwise very informative and greatly researched study of the dalit literary field. Such an omission is easily explainable in terms of time. Sarah Beth Hunt did her fieldwork around 2004, Navaria's novel was published in 2008 and Navayana appeared on the New Delhi scene only in 2008 when the publisher S. Anand moved the publishing house to New Delhi from Chennai.

Navayana had started out publishing small and relatively cheap copies of dalit themed and dalit written books in English in 2003 out of Chennai, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Navayana was initially an adventure in which two people were involved: Ravikumar, a bank employee and leading Tamil public intellectual who happens to be dalit, and S. Anand, a print media journalist. While keeping their day jobs, they started Navayana as a spare-time activity. (While Ravikumar went on to turn to full-time politics in 2006, Anand quite his journalism job and became a full-time publisher since 2007.) Before turning to publishing, Anand, a Tamil brahmin, had been a committed journalist documenting caste issues and furthering the dalit cause. In the self-reflective "Notes on my Brahmin Self" (2005), Anand lays out his journey from a brahminical family to his deep scepticism against the privileges that accrue from his birth. He places a particularly strong emphasis on the fact that this scepticism does not remove his privileges and does not make him a non-brahmin. His commitment to the dalit cause had allowed him to build a strong network with dalit and other non-dalits thinkers and intellectuals involved in the movement and its documentation. Such a network came handy throughout the years for establishing the publishing house and scouting material.

After his move to New Delhi, when he began to manage Navayana on his own, he diversified his list to include works on issues other than caste. Today his backlist amounts to about fifty titles including social theory, various non-fiction books and an internationally acclaimed graphic biography of Ambedkar—illustrated by tribal artists. One of the aims of Navayana is to bring out poetry and fiction written in the various vernacular languages in translation and to introduce the English language reader. He argues that these should not only be read for being dalit writing but for their wider aesthetic merits. This consideration plays into the selection of writers and their works which I see as a contentious process in which English literary requirements inadvertently also assert themselves. Anand tries to walk the tightrope of bringing out texts that are not available in English while having to consider what can be read and how it can be read—at the same time keeping an eye on the market as well.

### Publishing and Marketing the Book

While traces of hegemony reveal themselves through the pressures on the position that the contributing actors hold and aim for, it becomes most apparent through the production process. The editor, who in this case is the publisher himself, has the final say over what shape the published text will take. In the case of *Unclaimed Terrain* the most difficult decision was posed by the language to be used. Language in this sense does not simply mean the flow and idiomatic use of English in the translation, although this was an important concern as well. The issue at hand was the amount of explanations to be included within the text. When the translator sent in the manuscript it became clear that particular sections needed some glossing, especially in scenes that were about dalit practices, often specific to the subcaste that provided the identity of the main characters. This difficulty arises from brahminical hegemony, also explained by Kancha Ilaiah in *Why I am not a Hindu* quoted in the first chapter, which effectively excludes the everyday cultural practices, religion and mythologies of dalits from the dominant culture. They remain unrepresented in text books, literature and common discourse, making texts that do represent them difficult to decode for a wider readership blinded by brahminical hegemony. This situation is even

more aggravated by the innumerable variety that dalit culture takes based on caste and regional differences.

To resolve such problems the recourse to adding footnotes, in consultation with the translator and the writer, was ruled out. Anand argued that a dalit writer, as much as any other, deserved the respect to have his text treated like any other literature—without the aid of a clumsy glossary and footnotes. In the end we opted for explaining the most essential things as part of the flowing text, sometimes adding lines that were not part of the original text. In some places, this meant neutralising caste references and in others accentuating them. This was mostly done in reference to mythologies and religious practices and especially in parts where they remained inconspicuous. However, the real difficulty came with the subtle references that situate Navaria's characters in a certain caste group. One particular characteristic of these stories is that they do not explain away the identity of its characters by directly stating their caste affiliation. And to add an explanation after every surname and every subtle cultural reference that situates a character in a certain caste and endows him/her with a part of his/her identity would have made the text extremely cumbersome to read and would have also taken the translation farther from its original.

In the context of brahminical hegemony, the 'failure' to render the text readable to readers unacquainted with the specific caste practices described in the stories was a political act. The need for such an act arises from the precarious position occupied by Navayana, which limits the extent to which it can challenge the 'alternative hegemony' established by caste politics. However this political act of rejecting the pressures of brahminical hegemony had proved to be a hindrance in finding a readership for the book. To this date out of the 1500 copies printed in January 2013, one and a half years later, only 500 copies have been sold. This despite the fact that the Anand did everything to get it reviewed in the most important and well-circulated English language magazines and newspapers, making it one of the most reviewed books brought out by Navayana. The minimal glossing also may severely impacts the wider circulation of the book among readers who do not know enough about Indian culture. This counters one of the aims for bringing out the book in English: to reach a western audience that only gains knowledge about Indian

society through the Anglophone novel written by writers from privileged castes. To reach such an audience would complete another stage in asserting dalit authority to define what it means to be modern Indian.

Still low sales figures can only be partly attributed to minimal glossing. Another restricting factor is the hegemony of the novel genre in the English publishing and consumption world. While the short story remains a well-marketable genre in Hindi, English publishers and readers globally have a clear preference for novels. This severely limits the possibility of selling the foreign rights to publishers abroad, which constitutes a significant part of the marketing strategies of a small independent publishing house such as Navayana. The situation is further aggravated by the limited readership of translated works from the vernaculars.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the publishing process of dalit texts in English—from the act of writing to the selection of stories, the translation and the editorial process—reveals the working of certain aspects of hegemonic forces. This does not mean that Navayana and the actors involved in the publishing process become the instrument of these forces, but rather that it has to operate within the limits set and pressures exerted by dominant literary practices, as well as market forces. While translating and bringing out short stories in English has been made an integral part of furthering the cause of the counter-hegemonic political project of dalit writers, it has to contend with hegemonic forces at every step. The author needs to write in a certain language and a genre created by upper castes to make his voice heard. The international academic, through her struggle for academic prestige, has to fulfil certain requirements, which affect her selection of the stories. The publisher has to take into account his precarious position as the savarna arbiter of who and what gets represented and in what manner. However, the decision taken on the level of language becomes the most illustrative of the pressures and limits of hegemonic forces. In his struggle to bring out a 'readable' text but remain faithful to the political message of the counter-hegemonic dalit literary project the editor has to take difficult decisions. Through observing the

publishing process and the difficulties of marketing to a minute detail we can see how the hegemonic asserts itself on the level of the translation and the publishing process and reception. These forces channelled through the different actors involved and through specific market processes. Through this case study we can observe the limitations of the possibilities of such a counter-hegemonic literary project as dalit literature.

### Chapter 3 – (Dis)continuities of Identity in *Unclaimed Terrain*

“I get criticised a lot for my stories,” said Ajay Navaria during one of our meetings at the Navayana office.

“How can that be?” we asked, incredulous.

“People think that I write pornography. They also believe that I have written ‘Cheekh’ from experience. I receive most of the criticism for this story.”<sup>7</sup>

#### The end of critical innocence?

The coming into prominence of Navaria in the dalit literary field seems to hail in dalit literature what Stuart Hall termed “the end of a certain critical innocence in black cultural politics” (1988). In Hall’s terms this means the contestation of a singular black identity that masks the enormous cultural and historical differences among individuals. At the same time it means that “[y]ou can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject” (Hall 1988, 444). This means a move away from the representation of the black or, in the case of dalit literature, dalit subject as essentially similar and good. Such a shift towards inclusionary dalit literary politics is made necessary by the regional, subcaste, gender and class differences. Suppressing or ignoring such differences can alienate those whose specific experiences are not represented by the singular dalit category. For Hall, there is a need for such a politics of difference “which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity” (1988, 444).

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<sup>7</sup> The conversation had been recreated from memory. It does not follow the original word by word, but aims to capture the gist of it.

In this chapter I argue that Navaria's strategy to claim that his stories are best interpreted as dreams is a strategy which allows him to move away from the restrictive forces of the 'alternative hegemony' established by dalit identity politics. Through the analysis of three stories I show how the direct connection between the authorial self, the protagonist and thereby community, which characterises dalit literary politics, is broken.

The broken chain of authorial self, protagonist and community and the political strategy of dreaming

### The political strategy of dreaming

Sarah Beth Hunt (2007) quotes the senior Hindi scholar Manager Pandey, saying that dalit autobiographies are not simply of individuals but of the whole community, where the plot becomes the past and present of the entire community. She goes on to assert that there is a "deep connection between the individual and communal self, and this relationship provides the Dalit individual with a sense of power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression" (Beth 2007, 551). However, the "deep connection between the individual and communal self" also masks very real tensions within the community based on different subcaste, gender and caste identity (Beth 2007). These tensions are especially hard to resolve within the genre of autobiography, because of the insistence on the political value of experience and personal politics.

In the preface, titled "To give meaning" (*Sarthakta ke liye*), to his first collection of short stories titled *Patkatha aur anya kahanian* (Patkatha and other stories 2006), quoted in the introduction of this thesis, Navaria stresses the importance that his stories are better understood as dreams than simple stories. This tilts the balance between individual and self, so carefully preserved by dalit literary politics according to Pandey, towards the individual and recognises the particular experiences that accrue from different class, gender and subcaste backgrounds. However, this difference does not mean "a radical and unbridgeable separation," nor "an infinite sliding of the signifier", but the recognition of a "positional, conditional and conjectural" difference according to Hall (1988).

That there is a danger even in a fictive depiction of characters that do not fully confirm to the norm can be seen from the fact that he is severely criticised for his writing. In an interview, Navaria's exclaims that, "[t]hey simply refuse to believe that I'm a part of 'Dalit writing'" (Jha 2013). One of the reasons behind this criticism, which he cites in his interview, that his portrayal of situations is not political enough. He does not always integrate plotlines that culminate the epiphany of the awakening of dalit consciousness experienced by other dalit literary characters. Such a statement seems to point to the way in which 'alternative hegemony' is created and policed dalit literary politics. The quote from the preface of *Patkatha aur anya kahaniyam* both anticipates such criticism and aimed at blunting its edge. The quoted paragraphs invoke intertextually Salman Rushdie's courage in writing despite the fatwa and religious indictments against him for legitimising the Navaria's own transgression. Such claims are also aimed to lessen the threat to the emerging 'alternative hegemony' but allows to put pressures against its boundaries.

### Generational conflict

[T]oday was the day of the sacrifice to thank the gods for a son, for which Father had specially called Kalu from the village. How could I convince Father that the power of making babies lay in my thighs and my wife's calves, and was not the result of some divine intervention? Anyway, Kalu was here, and Father had promised him the hide and Rs 251, besides the cost of travel. Owing to his abiding faith, Father had acquired the habit of adding a token one rupee to any amount. And these days you didn't find a spare rupee so easily. Kalu was a famed butcher in his neighborhood, Father had told us. He also said Kalu would take one look at his watch and set himself to make mincemeat in five minutes, the pieces still quivering. (Navaria 2013, 17)<sup>8</sup>

One way in which Navaria engages the differences in dalit identity is his focus on generational conflict. In the compressed family saga of "Sacrifice" (Bali 2006/2013) generational differences are engaged in a dialogical space instead of being suppressed. The main tension that provides the occasion for telling the story is between the middle aged and traditional father and his young, politically awakened, Ambedkarite

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<sup>8</sup> The translations of the stories are all from Laura Brueck.

Buddhist<sup>9</sup> son who is married to a woman from another dalit community without the family's approval. The father is shown to be backward in both religious and social matters—he arranges for the sacrifice of a goat for the gods so that a grandson is born instead of a granddaughter, and he says he would have preferred a bride for his son who brings a large dowry instead of an educated schoolteacher, and he believes that to die in one's own religion (Hinduism, instead of Buddhism that Avinash embraces) will get him to go to heaven. He also scorns the views held by his son and refuses to call him by his new name Avinash.

Kalu, a caste member who continues the caste occupation and remains a butcher in the village, brings the generational tension to a breaking point and eventually also to a resolution. He is invited from the village to perform the sacrifice—the cause of tension between father and son—but he also brings the past with him. Kalu reveals, in a narrative broken by the activities around the sacrifice, the tragic love affair between Avinash's father and a brahmin girl, Archana. Through this narrative, Father, the embittered cruel man who calls her wife and her relatives “sisterfucker” and “motherfucker,” turns into a sensitive human being with a personal history. Father hears the tragic story of rape and abuse heaped on his one-time lover who stays behind in the village, but his grief becomes greater as Kalu, consumed with alcoholism and smoking, dies in the hospital after performing the sacrifice. At the end of the story Father is eventually reconciled with his son and daughter-in-law.

Through depicting generational conflict that occurs between traditional occupations, traditional mindset and new dalit political ideas, Navaria engages many other concepts whose definition is essential for the ‘alternative dalit hegemony’. The story explores the questions to what it means to be religious because of a political commitment, as opposed to out of tradition and also how these can be resolved without a complete unification of values. At the end of the story the father is not awakened to the new political truth

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<sup>9</sup> Dr B.R. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 along with several thousand (check) dalits in protest against the caste discrimination inherent in Hindu thought, thereby incorporating religious conversion among the political repertoire of his followers.

held by his son, as the father in Omprakash Valmiki's *Pacchis chauka der sau*, he simply accepts the individual path chosen by Avinash.

## The issues of class and work

### Class differences

Class differences come to the fore in the same story between Avinash and Kalu. While Avinash is keen to talk to Kalu, he is also repulsed by the latter's profession, crude gestures and the dirt collected in the corner of his eyes. These, and the squatted position Kalu maintains relentlessly throughout the story, make up his typical rural habitus that is in stark contrast with Avinash's middle class ethos and 'enlightened' political sensibilities. The crucial point however comes when Avinash questions Kalu about his work and if he does not think it is a sin to kill—it is the butchering of animals that makes their caste community a target of discrimination. To which Kalu answers in a "rustic yet irrefutable" logic that what he does is honest work and his earnings are well-deserved (*halaal ki kamai*). He also continues that even thakurs, members of the landowning caste, hunt and eat meat, but they are not treated as untouchables, "We butcher to fill our stomachs, but they ... does anyone treat them as untouchables? No, no, the problem isn't with the profession, it's poverty." Attributing such an incisive analysis to a 'non-enlightened' character, who has no problem as thinking of himself as low caste also subverts the image of the ignorant, rural and backward dalit in need of political enlightenment—a prevalent representation in dalit writing. The issue of work, especially its nature, is central to the tensions and conflicts both within the dalit community and in relation to non-dalits, as the underlying logic of the caste system can be traced back to stigmatised occupations.

### Roles reversed: dalit boss, brahmin peon

"Saheb, neither Layakram nor Durgadas is anywhere to be found," Tiwari reported to Narottam, despite the fear that Narottam might just make him take care of the problem.

"Okay, you can go. Tell Layakram about it tomorrow," Narottam was busy reading a file.

"Why don't I do it, sir ... you'll be unnecessarily bothered," the words tumbled from Tiwari's

mouth. Tiwari was surprised and troubled ... who was this damned lowborn speaking from inside him?

“You?” Narottam’s eyes met Tiwari’s for the first time. “Why should you be needlessly troubled?” There was a mixture of respect, astonishment, and confusion in this unexpected question.

“Why not, sir? ... Doesn’t the bathroom get blocked at our home ...? I’ll just poke at it with a stick, and it’ll be settled.” As he said this, Tiwari stepped into the toilet.

A sound emerged from the toilet—gharr-ghurr-gharr-ghurr. “What shame is there in work, sir?” Tiwari called out between the gurgles.

Most of Navaria’s protagonists are dalits, but the equation between the oppressed dalit and the oppressive brahmin is turned on its head through the portrayal of the dalit peon in a government enterprise. The reservation system in political bodies, government schools and enterprises have given the opportunity for a class of dalits to rise in material and social standing. In the story “Yes Sir” (2012) we, the readers sensitised to dalit literature and issues of caste oppression, gain an insight and learn to sympathise with the pain of the brahmin peon, Tiwari, as he struggles to come to terms with the fact that while he is a ‘god’ back in his village,<sup>10</sup> in the city he has to wash the dirty dishes of the officers, even dalits who gained ascension through the reservation system. This is regarded as highly polluting in ritual terms for a brahmin, which brings into tension the obsession with cleanliness by the dalit officer, Deputy General Manager Narottam Saroj, who brings his coffee from home in a thermos and lectures Tiwari on the benefits of an expensive water purifying system, flaunting his access to wealth and modernity. Narottam comes across in the story as an arrogant and distant officer who humiliates Tiwari beyond what we feel is necessary as he calls him by name and does not give him the respect due to their age difference.

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<sup>10</sup> Brahmins are revered as gods in the village they are even called brahmin devta (god).

The above quote is from a conversation between Narottam and Tiwari about the blocked toilet, which should be cleaned up by the dalit cleaning staff of the office who cannot be found anywhere. Tiwari turns helpful in this scene after he learns that Narottam had facilitated his promotion from a peon to a clerk. Cleaning the toilet should be the most humiliating of all the tasks done by Tiwari for his 'low-born' boss, but he does it voluntarily thereby attaining salvation from the hell of the inherited casteist psyche. When he offers his help, Tiwari, for the first time calls himself a lowborn scum, a denomination reserved until then to Narottam. As the toilet is unblocked, he calls out triumphantly "It's going down alright, sir, slowly," which we may even read as equal to the "annihilation of caste".

### Thwarted mobility

He lay face-down on the bed. I massaged him quietly. Suddenly he got up and started to kiss me roughly. I didn't understand what was happening but threw him back on the bed with all my strength.

"No ... no, I'll pay extra."

I started to pack my things.

"One minute." He turned and went to the cupboard, then placed three bundles of hundred-rupee notes in my hand. "Take this. I'll give you more." I still couldn't figure out what he wanted. But as soon as he stuffed the wads of cash in my hand, he made an obscene gesture, and I understood. I had never seen so much money except in films. I could take revenge on Vinayak. I could send the money to the village. I could pay off my debt to Father. [...]

"Don't tell Suneja ... here is payment for your hard work." He winked. So this was work. Labor ... For the first time I understood that labor had many meanings in the city. The very thing that made me want to die back in the village was considered 'work' here. And one got paid for it. Here, labor had value. This opened up a new world.

The short story “Scream” (2006) is perhaps the most controversial of all of Navaria’s stories. The protagonist makes the usual move from the village to the city, driven away by a tragic incident in the forest where savarna boys rape him. When he severs ties with the priest who inculcated the importance of education in him and funded his studies, he first works as a private tutor, but because families neither pay well nor regularly, he falls on hard times and starts to work at a massage salon. He changes his name to Tyson, in a move similar to that of Avinash in “Sacrifice”. But this is no political move, it is rather a ‘professional’ one. The new name signifies no political awakening but rather the sexual potency that is attributed in this story to dalits—without self-reflection.

The above quote captures the moment when the lure of money, which the protagonist originally only wanted to support his education to fulfil the epitome of dalit aspirations, makes a gigolo out of him. Through this move the sexual abuse in the village turns into work for him. After his first encounter with a gay man from south India, he becomes the paid lover of a savarna woman who takes revenge on her husband whom she married for money. In this story, Navaria subverts the narrative of the socially mobile dalit, who pursues education and gains respectability through his job which he finds through the reservation system. The particularity of the situation of ‘Tyson’, whose real name we do not get to learn, calls into question whether dalit writing should be taken as representative of a collective dalit life.

## Conclusion

Through these narratives reveal the tensions which underlie the representation of the dalit subject.

Through the subversion of dalit narratives, the writer deconstructs the singular dalit subject and subjectivity, which in a strange way reduces the tensions inherent in the portrayal of dalit characters by other dalit writers but does not offer a final resolution. The particularity of individual experiences cannot be suppressed and but rather have to be engaged with. For the publisher, this complexity of characters, situations and images that conveys the ambiguities of representation may become useful to promote dalit literature to a wider audience. This is because the characters represented as constituted of multiple identities may bring the text closer to the sensibilities of savarna and international readers who are blinded

by the hegemonic denial of dalit life. However, these ambiguities of representation bring the stories close to threatening the ‘alternative hegemony’ established by dalit cultural politics, which makes these stories dangerous. This threat can only be blunted by the affirmation of the authors’ commitment to dalit political values, which make it a new voice in dalit literary politics. This, in turn, when looked at through the prism of Williams’ theory of cultural production, makes Ajay Navaria another step in the way dalit culture develops pressing against the limits and pressures of both brahminical hegemony and ‘alternative hegemony’.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I laid out the different forces that exert their pressures and set the limits of dalit literary production to provide a more composite picture than provided by most studies. I argue that a study of the dalit literary practice in its wider context, and not just in its relation to the comparatively more dominant Hindi literary form, points towards the understanding of the publishing of the short story collection *Unclaimed Terrain* as part of the dalit struggle against brahminical hegemony. In the first chapter, Williams' elaboration of the concept of hegemony turned our attention to the brahminical hegemony over language, the economic and political processes that provide the background for producing the English translation of Navaria's short stories. I also argued that the multilingual context in India complicates the relationship between the dominant, residual and emergent literary practices and that it provides a curious case where hegemony is not conveyed through a singular language. A consideration of Bourdieu's theory allowed me to argue in the second chapter that the hegemonical forces are channelled through the actors involved in the production of cultural products. And I showed how creating a language in which a text can be decoded by a wider readership more integrated into brahminical hegemony requires contentious decisions to be made. However, such risky decisions are policed heavily based on the identity of the actors involved and therefore editors have to contend with the 'alternative hegemony' created by the dalit movement for more effective politics. In this sense, this study throws light on how inquiries into the cultural politics should not only be concerned with the limits set by hegemonic processes but also by emerging 'alternative hegemonies' that are established by the emergent class of dalit thinkers and intellectuals to be able to conduct more effective politics. In the last chapter, I examined the way in which Navaria strategically characterises his stories as dreams, which allows him to court more the more contentious issue of a divided identity. I argue with Hall that such a recognition of the differences that are masked by a more unified identity represented and codified by the dalit literary politics is a necessary move pressed for by the irrepressible class-, gender- and subcaste based differences. However, through recounting of the criticisms that Navaria has to contend with I show that making such a move in literature is not such an easy task to achieve. I even suggest that partly why this is considered a threat against dalit

politics is because it can be interpreted as a way to buy into the forces of hegemony. However, I also argue that the new voice that Navaria represent may be seen as a renewal of dalit literary politics and to keep up the edge of the movement new voices need to emerge to contest the established aspects of 'alternative hegemony'. In this way, my final argument is that as Navaria's voice becomes established, there will be a need for yet new voices that build the forms and discourses opened up by his writing, but surpass that. This is what gives a political movement its dynamism.

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