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Subverting the Difference: Reading Roja Singh's *Spotted Goddess* as a Dalit Testimonio

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Abstract

Accurately capturing the lived experiences of the oppressed within broader historical and social settings is the cornerstone of testimonio, a genre serving to bear witness to oppression and catalyse social change. The central premise of Roja Singh's insightful testimonio *Spotted Goddesses: Dalit Women's Agency-Narratives on Caste and Gender Violence* asserts the inherent connection between misogyny, sexual domination, and the caste system. While engaging contemplatively with Singh's personal journey, the lived experiences reveal that caste-based violence is systemic and that Dalit women embody the "difference" that makes them distinct and untouchable. The paper explores how the testimonial narratives illustrate the way caste undermines the dignity of the oppressed, and it highlights the unwavering determination and tenacity of Dalit women who seek justice against caste hierarchy. It concludes by demonstrating how, despite all the obstacles, Dalit women form alliances with organisations and government authorities to elevate their standard of living and, ultimately, build a democratic and equitable society for the future generations of Dalit children.
Keywords: testimonio, Dalit, caste, lived experience, violence, narratives.

Introduction

Translated literally, testimonio denotes "testimony", as in bearing witness in court. It is imperative in this setting to distinguish between participant narratives and testimonios, as the latter is merely documented, similar to "oral history". Oral history depends heavily on the motive of the person who records it (usually a social scientist) and the written material that emerges from this process is interpreted as "data". In contrast, the narrator's purpose in the testimonio is crucial. The narrative being told in the testimonio should engage with concerns of oppression, discrimination, subalternity and the struggle for existence. The position that the

testimonio's reader takes on is comparable to that of a jury in a courtroom proceeding. Testimonio prioritises "sincerity" over literary excellence, in contrast to conventional fiction (Beverley 32).

In the 1960s, testimonio emerged as an alternative style of storytelling that aligned with the national liberation movements and the radicalism of that era in Latin American countries, where two contemporaneous events acknowledged it as a literary genre. In the late 1960s, literary critics recognised testimonios in works like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) and Miguel Barnet's *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1967). In 1970, Casa de las Americas in Cuba decided to begin awarding a prize for acclaimed testimonios in their annual literary contest (Beverley 31). John Beverley argues that suppressing social challenges gives rise to alternative forms of writing that subvert the established canon of literature. Moreover, the narrative frameworks that define mainstream literary works do not align with the realities of working-class authors. They face persistent challenges in conforming to canonical literary standards (30). Testimonio emerged as a literary genre in response to this predicament. Testimonio can encompass but is not confined to any of the subsequent textual classifications, ranging from conventional to unconventional forms of literature: “autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novel-testimonial, nonfiction novel, or factographic literature” (45). The "liberationist testimonio" merges qualitative research, oral history, and memoirs by Chicanas and Latinas (Reyes and Rodríguez 525).

The rise in testimonio's popularity is tied to the notion of "speaking betterness," a term widely recognised due to the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the "consciousness-raising" sessions of the women's liberation movement. Accordingly, the testimonio exemplifies the feminist and New Left principle that posits "the personal is the political" (32). The way testimonios narrate the stories is akin to picaresque novels since picaresque texts show the protagonist recounting his/her life (33). In contrast to picaresque texts, which present a pervasive social affliction such as marginalisation and poverty using the protagonist's own experience, a testimonio requires the narrator to be a representative member of a certain social class or group and the reader of the testimonio is expected to consider the narrative to be legitimate and accept the narrator's promise of authenticity. In other words, the testimonio does not exhibit "liberal guilt". It provides insight into "an appropriate ethical and political response" alongside "the possibility of solidarity than of charity" (36).

A testimonio encourages readers to empathise with unfamiliar causes by invoking the principles of "ethics and justice”. It has significantly supported global campaigns for solidarity

and human rights (37). Additionally, the testimonio exposes hidden inequalities, especially in rural areas, that mainstream representations overlook (31). It challenges the literary canon as an ideological tool of oppression and establishes itself as a unique literary form. In this vein, Beverly states that literary analysis is "no longer a question of 'reading against the grain', as in the various academic practices of textual deconstruction we are familiar with, but of beginning to read against literature itself" (58). Beyond the confines of traditional literary forms, testimonio is evolving into a new "postfictional" literary genre with significant socio-political impact as it presents real-life accounts that allow readers to observe and engage with "the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject" (43).

In November 1998, the journal *Seminar* published an article by M.S.S. Pandian defining testimonio in the Indian context, particularly concerning Dalit autobiographical writings (with particular reference to Bama's *Karukku*). The article gained relevance after being reproduced in *Gender and Caste* (2003), edited by Anupama Rao. Pandian argues that by using anonymity to portray a vivid picture of tyranny, Bama represents diverse Dalit voices (120). The narrative includes many anonymous characters, such as the village priest, politically powerful upper caste members, nunnery residents who were ardent casteists regardless of their religious affiliation, the educational institutions where she was subjected to caste discrimination, and the Dalit headman. Furthermore, the "polyphony of other dalit voices" that permeates *Karukku* serves to emphasise the absence of the personal pronoun "I" in the text (131-133).

> It is indeed not an autobiography…At the first sight it reads like a history of a village. From another angle it reads like an autobiography. From yet another angle, it reads like a brilliant novel…In other words, Bama's is a case of willfully violating genre boundaries. This act of violating genre boundaries is where Bama's narrative, even as it verbalizes her own life story, depletes rather effortlessly the autobiographical an outcome of bourgeois individualism, and displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community. Her story, to put it differently, refuses to be her own but that of others too. *Karukku* achieves this through a range of textual strategies. (131)

Sharmila Rege's 2006 book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* is a noteworthy addition to the testimonio genre. According to Rege, Dalit testimonios involve "rememory" or "rebuilding histories of institutions and practices" overlooked by the nation. Dalit women's testimonies contest the distorted recollections of both Dalit and women's movements (Rege 75). Furthermore, Pramod K. Nayar accurately notes that the testimonios "expose the duplicity of dominant discourses within India, generating a different history of India because they point to the fault lines, conflicts, and repression within dominant historical narratives through their narrative recovery of trauma" (Nayar 255).

Redefining Dominant Narratives: Activism and Resilience in Challenging Traditions

Jebaroja Suganthy-Singh's testimonio *Spotted Goddess: Dalit Women's Agency Narratives on Caste and Gender Violence* (2019) presents ethnographic narratives, encapsulating the active self-expression of Dalit women and the author herself. It provides the background and historical context and explores spaces where the author communicates with speaking subjects (Natrajan 383). Singh discusses the three traditional stories, *Manusmriti*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata,* from the following perspective: informing the reader about cultural, representational paradigms of "different" women who are outside dominant communities and an appropriation of these narratives by dominant communities as sacred roots to a tradition of punishing these women (16). Singh does not want to criticise the purported holiness of the epics or the religious fervour these works elicit. Instead, by drawing a comparison between the dominant stories and the mythical representation of Mariamma, the folk goddess venerated by Dalits, she draws attention to the importance and relevance of Dalit women's stories and challenges prevailing stereotypes ingrained in spiritual beliefs. She recounts testimonies of violence directed at Dalit girls and women and aims to spotlight the Dalit women who are leading the way as advocates for social transformation.

Singh highlights *Manusmriti'*s dehumanisation of Dalit women, likening them to wild animals and labelling them as polluted and cursed. Valmiki's *Ramayana* further perpetuates these cultural norms by portraying Sita and Soorpanakha, reinforcing purity and impurity standards. Soorpanakha is marginalised as the hideous "other" while Sita embodies the ideal of pativrata (dedication to her spouse). Mythical characters Soorpanakha from *Ramayana* and Hidimvà from *Mahabharata* transform their appearance to meet societal expectations of 'desirable' women (57). Caste structures revolve around the dichotomy of "clean" or "dirty," pushing Dalits into the most stigmatised occupations based on societal biases and those who challenge this face persecution (17). Dalit women often endure sexual abuse and exploitation in environments controlled by dominant caste groups, who mistreat them for personal satisfaction. The "sub-gendered" position of Dalit women confines them to situations in which their status as women, Dalits (4), and people of limited means renders them voiceless. Singh connects the manifestations of "earthy humanness" that Dalit women assert "positive identities, rich culture, and leadership capacities" (40). It is important not to lose sight of the reality that women from marginalised groups in India are frequently subjected to rape, abuse, and humiliation in line with social conventions that penalise those who are perceived as being "different" (xxxiv).

Mariamman, a deity predominantly worshipped by the Dalits, permeates Dalit women's daily life and is referred to as "Spotted Goddesses" in the title of the text. Singh links Mariamman's

repute as a "spotted goddess" who settles on people's bodies in the form of smallpox to the Dalit identity in her testimonio. In doing so, she contrasts the social and spiritual importance of prominent gods and goddesses in popular Indian culture. Through their active campaigning, the Dalit women contest the severe punishments enforced on their bodies for the "crime" of being "untouchables", casting dispute on the notion that society and religion concurred with the use of the term (xiii-xiv).

A significant portion of this book originates from oral narratives shared by two Dalit women, Kalaimagal (Kalai) Arumugam and Rani Periasamy. Kalai founded Dr. Ambedkar Women and Children Regeneration and Development Program in Pudukkottai District, Tamil Nadu. Their activism addresses the personal struggles of Dalits, caste community accountability, Dalit patriarchy, police responsibility, poverty, alcoholism, and the physical dangers faced by Dalits (152). Kalai highlights rape as a violent tool of dominance and terror against Dalit women. Young Dalit girls and women in Pudukottai district predominantly work in stone quarries, facing dangers such as overloading accidents during truck travel, leading to injuries or fatalities. The overnight journeys further jeopardise the safety of these young girls. Most of them are subjected to sexual exploitation by lorry drivers. The girls work in hazardous conditions to support themselves and their families, aiming for independence. However, the men of dominant communities punish them for these "transgressive" activities through sexual exploitation. Kalai points out, “First of all, the raping of Dalit women—very easily they do it…Dalit girls are stripped [raped], even at a very tender age…To be affected at that age and to use Dalit girls is such a normal matter here” (98-99). Moreover, the dominant caste employers prefer hiring child workers, which leads to increased dropouts. Singh recounts Kalai's bold approach to highlight the agency of those involved in manual scavenging. Under Kalai's leadership, Dalit women in this occupation staged a dharna, disrupting daily life by obstructing streets with baskets carrying human faeces on their heads. They aimed to bring the attention of government officials to their cause, presenting them as "spotted goddesses" armed with baskets of human waste (157). Notably, Kalai successfully offered alternative employment opportunities to individuals who chose not to participate in manual scavenging and stone quarry work. This included diverse training programs, including tailoring, weaving, thatching, broom, shoe, and bag making (140).

Moreover, the Dalit women's collective headed by Kalai initiated an interest-free lending system, supporting diverse needs like childbirth and education as a part of a collaborative community approach. According to Singh, Kalai and Rani represent Antonio Gramsci’s idea of "organic intellectuals" who are from the earth and devoted to improving the lives of others

around them (158). Renowned Dalit scholar Gopal Guru emphasises Dalit women's rights and the need to express themselves differently: (1) Social experiences are influenced by caste, class, and gender positioning. (2) Dalit men replicate the oppressive methods of their high-caste adversaries against Dalit women. (3) Dalit women's experiences highlight the significance of grassroots resistance within the community (Guru 2549). Along similar lines, the Dalit women leaders show fearlessness in gaining community support and challenging dominant cultures. Their narratives highlight her commitment to truth. They risked their life many times, passionately demanding justice, demonstrating how rebellious spontaneity neglects careful safety considerations (156).

In addition to presenting the challenges faced by Dalit women, Singh also documents their artistic endeavours. The narrative in the testimonio does not solely centre on the political aspects of the subjects' lives. It is "re-imagined", organising memories thematically, from "the household, food and hunger, community, caste, culture and labour practices, the school, humiliation, violence, resistance, and collective struggles" (Rege 77). From 2002 to 2006, Singh travelled through more than twenty-five Dalit villages in the Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, meticulously documenting laments, lullabies, and songs sung in the work field. These verses employ a language of resistance to encapsulate subversive concepts. They serve as a creative outlet for coping with subjugation, capturing the experiences of untouchability and beautiful elements of nature. (172).

> Songs are earthy expressions of Dalit culture, identity, subversive assertion, and affirmation of relationships. They are the thread, the color, the texture, the scent, and the movements that dwell within the seamless tapestry of the earthy lived experiences of Dalit women. (173)

These lyrical songs use earthly images and symbols to overturn negative stereotypes of Dalit women. They express profound spirituality through common natural elements. This transforms the singers' bodies from victims to powerful celebrants of their identity, showcasing Dalit women's knowledge, beauty and strength (201). The following song, recorded by the author, celebrates Yellamma, a folk deity as the generous provider who possesses wealth and protects the community's land.

> One litre of grain I measured, O *Yellamma*, one lakh litres of gold I measured. For the girl did I do all this? O *Yellamma* it is all yours You wear all splendor like a king, you are all splendor like a queen While she bathes head to foot, you guard her head specially . . . (195).

Singh notes that the singer offers gifts of gold and grain to the folk deity Yellamma, seeking her blessings for a prosperous life for her daughter. Yellamma is revered as a guardian who protects, purifies, and sustains the feminine identity of women. The ritual of bathing water, blessed by Yellamma, represents purification for the daughter's body. The Singer emphasises

the dual role of Yellamma, providing economic and spiritual security, as material wealth is dedicated to the girl's well-being. The mother, acting as the caretaker, can accumulate substantial gold through her spiritual connection with Yellamma, suggesting boundless opportunities for nurturing Dalit women across generations (195).

Claiming Dalit Heritage and Identity

The last two chapters of the book distinctly forge a connection with Singh's initial assertions, weaving together the unity and empowerment of Dalit women, born from their intentional embrace of Dalit identity, with Singh's evolution toward caste consciousness. In the penultimate chapter, Singh examines two of Bama's novels, *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994), while also sharing excerpts from an oral interview conducted with her. Singh illustrates the defiance of caste imagination by using the works of Dalit writer Bama, whose writings confront the oppressive belief that Dalit women are "imperfect" objects in society. She criticises the desire for lust after the bodies of Dalit women by members of dominating cultures who also disdain them as "untouchables" (206). Bama's works depict the caste system as an influential tool in shaping cultural norms. They highlight Dalit women as vocal contributors within a complex network of oppressive forces encompassing gender, caste, and religion (Singh 204). In *Sangati*, Bama presents the perseverance of Dalit women in Puduppatti, Tamil Nadu. She exposes the exploitation that Dalit women endure, inflicted by both the "dominant caste masters" and their devoted Dalit male servants who mirror the violent authority of their masters. In *Karukku*, Bama explores how Hinduism and Christianity impact Dalits. Narrating her experience as a Catholic nun, she unveils pervasive caste divisions in the convent that deeply affected her, ultimately prompting her resignation. Using the Palmyra leaf's double-edged shape metaphor in the title, Bama symbolically expresses internal struggles while critiquing Hindu rituals and the unfulfilled promises of Christianity (204-205). During her interview with Singh, Bama highlights the uniqueness of Dalit feminism, underscoring distinct issues. Despite consistently questioning injustice within their community, Dalit women's voices go unheard. To address this, Bama opines that Dalit women must depend on education, enabling broader connections, facilitating the comparison of current situations with alternatives, and raising awareness (223).

In the final chapter, Singh reflects on her personal odyssey, delving into her Dalit identity and concisely exploring her family's Dalit roots. According to George Yudice, the authors of testimonios participate in "an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective" rather than merely producing their works for or at the behest of a group (15). The vitality of testimonial writing originates from its stark contradiction to the

conventional author's attempt to embody the "whole people". According to Yudice, "the true "popular portrayer of history" is not a person of the people but rather a "mediator" who "bring[s] to life those objective poetic principles which underlie the poetry of popular life and history" (16). Thus, one of the key tenets of postmodernism is congruent with testimonial writing. It rejects "grand or master narratives", a concept defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who posits that denouncing such narratives involves exploring a distinct discourse focused on emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstances, rather than seeking universal truth (16). Yudice points out:

> Emphasising popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting a right official history. (17)

Correspondingly, Singh notes that documenting Dalit lived experiences is a personal expedition for her, fostering a connection with her Dalit heritage. Until coming to terms with it, she toggled among "the Dalit, dormant Dalit, and non-Dalit identity roles" as "a strategic practice of a constant 'hide and seek' game' to ensure protection for herself and her loved ones (xxi). Initially, her Christian faith carried personal significance rather than the social implications of her Dalit identity, a realisation that came later. Her parents, well-educated and highly esteemed, kept their Dalit identity hidden from their children, as there was no situation where the caste question arose (227). Her father, a college professor, and mother, a middle school teacher, resided on Sharma Street. They assimilated into society as well-educated Christians to conceal socially imposed identity (242). Singh asserts that her mother's quiet, respectful, and gentle-spirited disposition, though unspoken openly, originates from her Dalit female identity and influences her career and home life (244). Growing up, she was oblivious to caste divisions but keenly observed the kind treatment of the 'poor' in her Catholic school. Later, in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, working in a college, she experienced distancing and discrimination from Christians of the Shudra community (228). They disapproved of her family's involvement in church activities due to their communal identity (231). At twenty-six, she learned about her Dalit roots through her husband, who disclosed that her Dalit ancestors converted to Christianity. She writes, "I was bewildered by a sense of shame and denial" (233). The realisation gradually led her to engage with rural Dalit farmers, and from their simple, selfless, and earthy existence, she found comfort that came from "a deep sense of belonging" (234). Embracing her "Dalit femaleness" as a "positive act of resistance to cultural norms", she gradually grasped the complexities of Dalit lives. Educated and land-owning Dalits exhibited superiority over poor Dalits. Caste

women and children from Shudra communities expected servitude from Dalits. Living abroad as a dark South Asian Dalit academician, she actively discussed the Indian caste system with others, eliciting both positive and negative reactions from expat Indians (237).

Singh embraces the vitality of Dalit female identity as "a life-giving energy in which I take pride", even as they risk their social standing. She, too, fears losing the security her ancestors built. This security can be preserved through the strength of Dalit female voices and the acknowledgement of their concerns (245). She states, "Practices such as transnational feminism harbours the preservation and re-generation of voices within experiential lived discourses rooted in an earthy humanness" (246).

Referring to Singh's view that caste is a "culturally rooted social stratification patented through religion" (xxviii), Natrajan makes two points. Firstly, the discourse on the "Hindu character of caste" requires reconsideration. Secondly, he contends that Christianity seems to question the sacredness and naturalisation of caste inequality without completely abolishing it (388). Notably, Natrajan clarifies that the representation of Mariamman aids in comprehending the links between caste as a historical and social structure and religion (in this context, Christianity and Hinduism). The oppressed draw strength from their folk deity, Mariamman, the spotted goddess, enabling themselves to become vanguards of justice despite facing subjugation. As a Dalit deity herself, she partakes in the impact of caste as she coexists within the same societal spectrum as caste Hindu goddesses while challenging the foundations of sociocultural norms (388). Natraj observes that Dalit leaders like Kalai and Rani are the spotted goddesses as they symbolise transformation and empowerment through their deeds and words (389).

Conclusion

Evidently, Singh's testimonio serves a pivotal role by addressing the need to recognise and provide opportunities for Dalits to take on leadership responsibilities. It achieves this objective by elucidating the long history of Dalit women spearheading the anti-caste movement and outlining the steps that must be taken to eradicate caste. The innate humanity and solidarity exhibited by these women undermine the foundations of the inherently anti-social character of the caste system. Moreover, the narrative serves as a significant counterbalance to two detrimental aspects of caste politics: caste blindness and identity-driven politics. It achieves this through the author's journey and the lived experiences of Dalit women, who rise above their shared experiences of oppression, contributing to constructing an inclusive society.

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