

Anthropology Book Forum

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SHAILAJA PAIK. 2022. *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality and Humanity in Modern India*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 422 pp., ISBN 9781503634084

Shailaja Paik's *The Vulgarities of Caste* delves into the lives of Dalit women engaged in *Tamasha*, a theatrical art form prevalent in Maharashtra, western India. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, Paik examines how these women's lives are shaped by the shifting dynamics of casteist and patriarchal systems, as well as the sociocultural frameworks of value and hierarchy within broader Maharashtrian and Indian society. The monograph is structured into three sections and eight chapters, offering a historical and analytical perspective on the interplay between *Tamasha* and the women who perform it. Paik focuses particularly on the notions of vulgarity, stigma, and discrimination, revealing how these are employed by dominant communities in placing the Dalit women who perform *Tamasha* at the most alienated position. Simultaneously, Paik highlights the agency of these women, exploring the dialectics of oppression and resistance. She portrays *Tamasha* not only as a site of discrimination but also as a powerful form of resistance, emphasizing its role in challenging societal norms and asserting agency.

In exploring the lives of *Tamasha* women, Paik stresses on the intricate interplay of gender, caste, and sexuality, arguing that the sex-caste-gender complex naturalizes and perpetuates their characterization as *Ashlil*, often translated as vulgarity, which became a dominant discourse in the late 19th century. Dalit women in *Tamasha* posed a dual threat to Victorian morality and the Brahmanical caste structure, both of which perpetuated hierarchical social relations. Paik examines how this idea of *Ashlil* positioned *Tamasha* performers as vulgar, immoral, and undisciplined, necessitating their reform and control. This framing, as Paik argues, marked the Dalit women's bodies as sites of regulation and policing, reinforcing caste and gender hierarchies.

In addition to *Ashlil*, Paik critically examines two other vernacular concepts from Maharashtrian society—*Assli* and *Manuski*—to analyze how colonial and post-colonial transformations in India intensified both structural and symbolic violence against women. Within the *Ashlil-Manuski-Assli* framework, *Ashlil*—associated with dishonour, immorality,

and inferiority—stands in direct opposition to *Assli*. *Assli* represents the notion of authenticity as defined by the Victorian and Brahmanical ideals that shaped the nation-building projects of colonial and post-colonial India. Interestingly, *Ashlil* is constructed as a byproduct of this very *Assli* ideal. Dalit Tamasha performers were inherently denied inclusion in the *Assli* (authentic), referring to the upper-caste individuals who claimed to embody the ‘modern, respectable Maharashtrian/Indian identity.’ On the contrary, the *Tamasha* women’s caste and class locations rendered them intrinsically *Ashlil*, with *Ashlil* serving as a structural antithesis to *Assli*. Paik highlights the paradox of colonial modernity’s ‘civilizing missions,’ which, while claiming to elevate society, simultaneously marginalized and devalued the arts and cultural expressions of those on the margins, particularly Dalit women. Paik thus reveals the deep entanglement of caste, morality, and modernity in perpetuating the marginalization of Dalit women in Maharashtra.

The Ambedkarite movements in postcolonial India adopted the concept of *Dalit Manuski* (humanity/human dignity) as a framework to resist the long exploitation and stigmatisation of Dalit labour, including that of *Tamasha* performers. At times, this resistance extended to advocating for the eradication of *Tamasha*, viewing it as a site of systemic oppression and stigma against Dalit women. Although these efforts were progressive, they faced challenges, such as addressing *Tamasha* performance as stigmatized labour without further stigmatizing the *Tamasha* women themselves. Despite these challenges, the Ambedkarite movements emphasized the centrality of dignity, advocating for giving up stigmatized labour and calling for equitable work opportunities for everyone. One notable example of this commitment is the Dalit Panthers’ activism in the 1980s, when they joined forces with sex workers to demand education, healthcare, and an end to police harassment. This solidarity reflects the broader *Manuski* project of Ambedkarite movements, which stood in direct opposition to the upper-caste-driven notion of *Assli*. While *Assli* was rooted in notions of cultural authenticity and caste-based exclusivity, *Manuski* emphasized universal human dignity and egalitarian principles.

At times, it would seem that the elements of *Manuski* and *Assli* appear to overlap, such as in their engagement with the concept of honour. However, the two diverge significantly in their interpretations. For the Ambedkarite *Manuski* project, honour is intrinsically tied to the dignity of life and labour, celebrating the worth of individuals regardless of caste. In contrast, the *Assli* framework links honour to sub-nationalist pride and cultural exclusivity, reinforcing hierarchical structures. I would stress that this distinction underscores the radical humanism of the Ambedkarite vision in challenging systemic inequalities.

While *Tamasha* is ostensibly a performance art, Paik highlights that it extends far beyond occupational labour, deeply intertwining with the performers' personal lives. This conflation of performance and personhood shows the overarching nature and intense stigmatised subjugation these women endure. They simultaneously perform their caste roles, which alienates them, and find a sense of belonging in their performances, as these constitute both their life and livelihood. Drawing on Judith Butler's distinction between performance and performativity, Paik underscores the dual nature of *Tamasha*. The women not only sing and dance but also create and convey meanings about caste, gender, and sexual identities through their performances. In other words, they live through their performance, embodying and demonstrating that life to others. This duality—creating meaning for themselves as artists while also generating stigmatized alienation within and for the society they perform for—is central to their experience. Paik observes that these women perform both their caste roles and caste identities for navigating a world of labour deeply embedded in the stereotypes of caste, gender, and sexuality. These stereotypes reflect and reinforce the moral fabric of India's caste society.

While foregrounding the oppressive sex-gender-caste complex that perpetuates the marginalization of *Tamasha*-performing women, Paik also highlights their everyday agency. Paik explores how these women creatively navigate and engage with the social world they inhabit, carving out a life and livelihood despite systemic constraints. In doing so, Paik contends that *Tamasha* women occupy an inherently ambivalent position regarding their belonging and personhood. Within the oppressive structure, *Tamasha* women find ways to capitalize on their occupation, which becomes more than just work, as their labour and personal lives seamlessly transcend into one another. Their ambivalence is further marked by their capacity to transgress caste-based moral boundaries. While this potential for transgression is a source of empowerment, it also distances them from possible kinship and social connections, creating additional layers of marginalization. This contrast highlights the complexities of their existence, as they both navigate and challenge the oppressive structures around them. By employing vernacular categories to unpack the ambivalent positions, Paik moves beyond rigid binaries and essentialist conceptualizations. She argues for a nuanced theory of ambivalence, capturing the complexity of *Tamasha* women's lived realities and their navigation of a deeply stratified social world.

In summary, the book focuses on the dialectical relationship between *Tamasha* women and the socio-political forces of caste and Brahmanical patriarchy, charting their transformations from the 19th century onward. Through this lens, it makes a significant contribution to the intersecting fields of Dalit studies, gender studies, and South Asian studies.

More specifically, this book contributes to the critical Dalit feminist literature that examines the intersection of caste, gender and sexuality, with notable contribution from M. Swathy Margaret and Smita M. Patil, among others. Smita M. Patil's early interventions (2013 & 2014) resonate with Paik's analysis, particularly in their focus on the existential dimensions of sexuality within the caste-gender framework. Drawing on the works of Gopal Guru (1993) and Sharmila Rege (1998 & 2002), Patil examines how the history of *Lavani* performance reveals the patriarchal, caste-based division of sexual labour, where lower-caste women were portrayed as having wild sexual urges and coerced into performing for upper-caste men. Both Patil and Paik, alongside other Dalit feminist scholars and activists, emphasize the importance of understanding Dalit women's practices and performances as complex sites of oppression and resistance. The Dalit women continually challenge the efforts of state structures and dominant caste societies to reinforce the stigma of the caste-gender-sexuality complex. Paik's nuanced engagement with these issues further extends the critical Dalit feminist literature, offering new insights into the intersections of performance, agency, and oppression.

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