

***Contesting Categories, Remapping Boundaries: Literary Interventions by Tamil Dalits*, by K. A. Geetha, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 195 pp.**

**Jajati K. Pradhan**

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Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
IIT Kharagpur, India  
E-mail: jajatitite@gmail.com

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In her preface, K. A. Geetha writes: “literature produced by historically marginalized communities ... can function as an important tool for social change. However, much depends on how this literature is received and interpreted” (ix). True to the spirit of this assertion, Geetha’s *Contesting Categories, Remapping Boundaries* locates as well as interrogates not only the material precarity of Tamil Dalits<sup>1</sup> but also “the production and reception of Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations” (31) in the larger public sphere, including academia. The book is a timely intervention in postcolonial studies in general and Tamil Dalit life writing in particular. It considers both fictional and nonfictional writings by them. Tamil Dalit literature is gradually gaining significance

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1) “Dalits” are the communities/groups belonging to the most oppressed class of the Hindu hierarchical social structure in India. Often called “untouchables,” Dalits have never been treated as human (they are not meant to be touched by the upper castes), and thus always maintained a victimhood status because of the operation and domination of caste ideology by upper-caste Hindus. Tamil Dalit literature very recently emerged from the Dalits of Tamil Nadu, an administrative state in India.

in academia, and is very much a recent outcome of the Dalit rights movement as part of the broader human rights discourse in India and beyond.

Some of the important issues this book takes up are the socio-political conditions behind the emergence of contemporary Tamil Dalit literature; its dominant themes and trends; the question of its inclusion/exclusion in university curriculum; the response of academia to the emergence of such a body of literature; the idea and ideology of “Dalit” and its literature; the influence of caste and location of students in the reception of Tamil Dalit literature; and finally, whether Dalit literature can bring about a social change given the nature of its poetics and politics.

The book contains five chapters besides the introduction and conclusion. The chapters are entitled “Emergence of Caste System in India” (chapter I), “From Depressed Classes to Dalit” (chapter II), “Contemporary Tamil Dalit Literature: Themes and Trends” (chapter III), “A Dalit among Dalits: The Angst of Tamil Dalit Women” (chapter IV) and “Tamil Dalit Literature in Academic Spaces” (chapter V).

The introduction offers a very comprehensive overview of the prevalence of caste structure in India and the emergence of Dalit literature, with particular reference to Dalit literature in Tamil and its translations; these are further explored throughout the book. The first chapter deals with some conflicting theories of caste formation in India, starting from anthropological and sociological conjectures of “caste as product of religious ideas” (3) for the maintenance of social order to the materialist standpoint of “caste as a structured social divide based on the wealth of different social groups” (3-4). This chapter also evaluates the impact of colonial modernity on caste structures and its constant reconfigurations over the years as, the author claims, “the spread of scientific and rational knowledge during the colonial rule led to an interrogation of social and cultural practices inherent in the caste system” (4) by leaders like B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasami Naicker (Periyar).

While the second chapter captures the history of Tamil Dalits, especially through Dalit journals from the early years of the twentieth century till the 1990s, the third chapter brings out the emergence, popularity and institutionalization of Tamil Dalit literature, with its themes and trends. The focus here is not only on the aesthetics of pain, suffering and exploitation, but also on “the various contexts and heterogenous experiences of Dalit communities [as] ... a rich source of Dalit culture, tradition and language” (5).

Chapter four analyses a very important aspect of Dalit literature: “the relationship between caste and gender and its effect on Dalit women” (5). What it contextualizes and argues is how caste, class and gender have a complex and discursive functioning and direct bearing on Dalit women’s (double) oppression, plus the emergence of Dalit women’s movements in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and their representation in Tamil Dalit literature. The final chapter has a very pedagogic focus, as it “analyses the response of students to Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations. Since Dalit literature has an ideological function in society, the survey examines whether reception of Tamil Dalit literature was influenced by the location and caste of the student. Further, it analyses whether reading Dalit literature brings about a social change” (6).

The book’s interventionist thrust owes much to its socio-political, aesthetic and ethical positioning. It not only brings out the concerns and contexts of marginalized Tamil Dalits and their literature to a larger public, but also raises a very fundamental “human” question—treating Dalits as human, and transforming their material conditions. Such a scholarly engagement was long due in postcolonial Dalit scholarship in general, and Tamil Dalit scholarship in particular. There is hardly any doubt about its aesthetic merit, given the nature and scope of the book, but what it certainly also requires, apart from thematic exploration and linear periodisation, would be a critical rigor in dealing with concepts, terminologies and analyses. For example, let us consider a few

introductory lines on the ideological stratification of Indian Hindu society that governs caste domination:

The social institution of caste is a predominant feature of the Hindu social organization ... rooted in the *Varna* system which segregates the Hindu society hierarchically into four *Varnas* namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras .... The panchamars or the 'untouchables' (the present day Dalits) are placed below the category of Shudras and exist outside the fourfold *Varna* system. The caste system attained religious sanction, since the *Vedas* and Hindu scriptures served to perpetuate such stratifications among Hindus .... The ideology of the upper castes (who are simultaneously the landowning class) were dominant in the society. The social institutions of religion, law, politics, art and literature reflected the dominant ideology of the upper castes. The castes which were lower in the hierarchy had to comply with the dominant ideology which legitimated their mental status and subjugation in the society. (1)

Such a discussion of the construction and maintenance of caste ideology in the social organization of Indian Hindu society, which perpetuates domination and violence against Dalits by the upper castes through literature and religious scriptures, could have been insightful had it been critically drawn on postcolonial theory (or on subaltern studies, specifically in the nexus between ideology, domination and "Othering"). To contest "categories" and to remap "boundaries," as the main title directs, what a reader minimally expects and what could have been brought into the analytic frame of the book is a theoretico-critical parlance along with (or in dialogue with) the literary analysis.

The book is, however, a significant addition to the nascent body of Tamil Dalit literature. What is remarkable about it, as the author claims, is its full fledged "in-depth study" of Tamil Dalit literature, and most

importantly its being the first such “study on the response of the academia to Tamil Dalit literature and its English translations” (31). To map this response, it deals with a qualitative study which was designed and executed in the classroom with students of English and Tamil literary studies.

In tracing the growth of Tamil Dalit writing from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present with a very comprehensive introduction, well-conceived chapterization and concise conclusion, the book is a sound piece of Dalit scholarship. Written in lucid language, such an ethically positioned book attempts to open up much on the location, intervention, and transformation of marginalized Tamil Dalits and their equally marginalized literature (i.e., the move from margin to center). This book is a must for scholars engaged in postcolonial subaltern/Dalit studies, and Tamil Dalit life writing.

