



The Transversality of Race And Caste in Isabel Wilkerson's Caste

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ABSTRACT

The question of caste is a predominantly occupying theme in Indian sociology, or generally the social sciences. Within this has developed an interesting question of whether caste shares an affinity with the question of race, overlapped by the experience of exploitation of those subjected to the caste system and apartheid racial regimes. Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste* is the latest contribution to this genre of thinking, writing from a more journalistic position. She poses a radical question of whether race is a caste and proceeds to outline arguments in favour of it. On the Indian academic side, there is a certain dearth of literature on race and preferring to analyse caste as an exclusive phenomenon of the Indian experience. This paper draws on the concept of border thinking and translation to initiate a thinking to go beyond mere categorisation and exceptionalism and advocate for alliance and transversality of experience in a collective system of exploitation.

Introduction

On March 16, 2021, in the early evening hour, a white man entered a spa in Atlanta, Georgia, not for massage but to gun down three workers in cold blood at the spot. He proceeded to commit the same action in two other spas. In total, he killed eight, six of them being Asian Americans¹. This incident occurred days after the Centre for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, released a statistical analysis which showed that anti-Asian hate crimes in 16 of the largest

¹ Park, Hana. (2021, April 2). He shot at 'everyone he saw': Atlanta spa workers recounts horrors of shooting. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/he-shot-everyone-he-saw-atlanta-spa-workers-recount-horrors-n1262928>.

American cities rose by 149% in 2020². This increase was attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the negative stereotyping that came with it.

America is not alone. Major Indian metro cities also saw numerous racist incidents, from passive-aggressive name-calling to beatdowns—, which, however, go mostly unreported. Race is a social construct, but there is no way to escape its empirical reality, fuelled by the anti-Chinese sentiment strand of Indian nationalism. Although not quite similar to how a new virus has evoked a spew of violence and vitriol, Isabel Wilkerson draws an analogy between the release of a pathogen by a bacterium due to the heating up of the earth's crust to the rise of hate crimes during and after the 2016 American Presidential election.

In *Caste: The Lies That Divide Us*, Isabel Wilkerson writes, “Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions” (2020). By “our” she means Americans. The book is a monumental undertaking which draws resources from three continents but whose analysis is firmly rooted in understanding the racial divisions in America. However, for Wilkerson, “Race, in the United States, is the visible agent of the unseen force of caste. Caste is the bones, race the skin.” She contends that race is just a tool, only a visible manifestation of a deeper structure that lies beneath— caste. Caste is defined as rigid and fixed, whose hierarchy is not based on feelings or morality but on power, resource, authority and assumption of competence. It is not hatred or personal but routines and unconscious expectations. In the caste system, everyone is assigned a role they have to perform. To combat the polarising divisions in America, she suggests that we move away from ‘race’ as a conceptual understanding, commenting on how diluted the concept has become and instead talk of America as a caste society, that instead of the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ we should talk in terms of ‘dominant caste’/‘upper caste’, ‘middle caste’ and ‘subordinate caste’/ ‘lower caste’. She believes these terms capture perfectly the societal positions they occupy

But is this just a futile exercise of merely putting words to mouth a new term to articulate an existing material condition? Or, to put it more pointedly, is this a case of merely replacing ‘race’ with ‘caste’ without aiding or advancing the conceptual understanding of human divisions in America? What is it that the concept of caste offers that our understanding of ‘race’ cannot? These are some of the questions that Wilkerson tackles in the book's first half.

² Faculty in the News, March 21 | CSUSB News | CSUSB. <https://www.csusb.edu/inside/article/446381/faculty-news-march-21>

Flaunting her penchant for metaphors and analogies unabashedly, Wilkerson weaves a tale of historical narrative littered with anecdotes and major events of spectacular violence from the antebellum South to the present day. She narrates the wretched fate of African Americans, which began when they first landed at Virginia Colony in 1619 and worked as unpaid labourers. However, refreshingly, she reaches out beyond America and depicts the caste system as a trans-continental experience. The caste system is not just an archaic hierarchy that is present in India. Utilising the full weight of two of the most iconic figures of anti-discriminatory movements, B.R. Ambedkar (“Martin Luther King of India”) and MLK. She argues that there is a commonality in the exploitations of the ‘Untouchable’/ Dalits in India and the African-Americans in the U.S. of A and their struggle for equality. Her main argument is that the caste system is present in India, United States of America and Nazi Germany. Despite one major difference — while the systems of division in America and India exploit its subordinate groups, Nazis attempted to exterminate its Jewish population— she, nevertheless, draws upon the historical experience of these three countries to present, what she calls, the eight pillars of caste— “...the principles upon which a caste system is constructed...”: (1) Divine Will and the Laws of Nature, (2) Heritability, (3) Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating, (4) Purity versus Pollution, (5) Occupational hierarchy, (6) Dehumanisation and stigma, (7) Terror as enforcement, Cruelty as means of control, (8) Inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority.

Drawing upon the pillars of caste and elucidating it, Wilkerson dives deeper by offering an analysis of American society through the lens of caste. The health crisis among the white population and the black elites, the scapegoating of African-Americans for societal ills, lack of solidarity among the working class, the fate of migrants, the heart-wrenching story of Devonte Hart to that of Satchel Paige, and many others, she interprets all of it as the working of a caste system.

As said earlier, the caste system sets expected roles. The white population was plagued by fear and anxiety as caste roles began to break down. One of the major events of this change was the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The pushbacks are sometimes subtle as muscle memories and generational habits of assumed caste roles intrude into everyday life. The inability to adjust to the changes has caused psychological illness on both sides of the divide. This is where the book also takes an autobiographical turn as Wilkerson narrates her encounter with caste prejudices. However, the pushbacks are also violent as police brutality, mass shooting, and incarceration becomes a quotidian experience.

The pushback peaked with Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential election. Wilkerson debunks the discourse of post-racial America after Barack Obama became the President. She demonstrates statistically how the majority of the white population, especially males, did not vote for Obama. Instead, they were injured as Obama broke the caste matrix.

Wilkerson, in *Caste*, contends that caste divisions are ultimately designed to inspire suspicion, lack of trust and empathy for one another. It is to erase any sense of responsibility for a fellow human. Instead, it becomes a license to commit atrocities without guilt, as some are dehumanised. She diagnosed that, ultimately, the silence and inaction of ordinary people make the system ticking. Wilkerson, as a solution, drawing upon Germany's attitude to their dark history, vouches for "radical empathy", an empathy in which one puts oneself in another's shoes, educates oneself and comes to discover our common humanity.

All in all, *Caste* is not proposing something new; it is a revitalisation of an old debate. Wilkerson acknowledges the work of Allison Davis and Burleigh Gardner (*Deep South, 1941*), John Dollard (*Caste and Class in a Southern Town, 1937*), Hortense Powdermaker (*After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South, 1939*) and Gunnar Myrdal (*American Dilemma, 1944*) in laying the foundation for the debate of race and caste dynamics in American scholarship. *Caste* is a part of this lineage. In the later sections, we inquire about the proposition of Wilkerson, whether race is a caste.

Is Caste Race?

As Wilkerson notes, there has been considerable resistance to suggesting that America has a caste system. Her book was also met with polarising reactions in popular media and academia. Leading African-American scholars such as Oliver Cromwell Cox (1959) argued that caste could not be applied to the USA as he believed there was a major difference between caste and race hierarchy. In the Indian caste system, everyone in the hierarchy accepted their position, and there was hardly any resistance. However, in the American race hierarchy, Black Americans have always resisted their position. Despite this instance of a bad reading of caste, Cox laid stress on the capitalist/imperialist roots in the invention of race, which is, unsurprisingly, left ignored in Wilkerson's book as she seems to be more concerned with the experience of black elites (to the point of bafflingly arguing that black elites suffer more than the poor blacks!).

However, the fretfulness over the play of race and caste is also felt on the other side of the globe. Indian scholars of caste have had to contend with the flip side, ‘caste-is-race’. The controversy over some Dalit activist’s attempt to include caste as part of the larger discourse of racism in the “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” Durban, 2001 sparked an intense debate in the Indian public forum and academia. Some scholars have sympathised with the idea given the commonality over the subjugation and struggle, although none would go to the extent of saying that the two are the same thing.

However, many others have vehemently opposed such an equation, as in the case of Dipankar Gupta (2001). Gupta attributes the mistaking of caste as a form of racism to the misreading of Vedic text by early Indologists and the similarity in the way in which blacks in America and ‘untouchables’ in India were treated. The Indologist interpreted fair and dark as two separate races of ‘fair Aryans’ and ‘dark Dravidians’. ‘Varna’ was also interpreted to mean skin colour. He contends that there are numerous ways in which they could have been interpreted which would avoid the racial interpretation— ‘fair’ and ‘dark’ in terms of knowledge and ‘Varna’ in terms of order

Our understanding of caste has been impinged upon by the discourse of race since the Europeans first started studying it (Dharampal-Frick & Katja, 2011, pp. 192-205). In the early pre-colonial period, European scholars were bewildered by the socio-cultural heterogeneity of Indian social life. Although physical “racial” differences were noted in terms of skin colour, they were not yet categorised and differentiated. However, this understanding of the contextually contingent nature of Indian society was transformed in the late seventeenth century with the onset of colonial domination. Along with the collaboration of Brahmin scholars, the colonial Orientalists appropriated a selected reading of Hindu scriptures and began to interpret Indian society through the lens of Brahminic interpretation of social hierarchy. According to the ‘book view’ of Indian society, Brahminic texts were canonised, and Indian society became a rigid caste society, at least on paper. Ethnographic enumerations later rigidified the categories further. It is a case of thinking into existence.

Wilkerson’s idea of caste appears ahistorical and reductive given this historical context. She essentially perceived caste as “fixed and rigid” while race is “fluid and superficial” (2020, p. 19), “caste, on the other hand, predates the notion of race...” (p. 69). Gupta argues that the caste system does not embody a uniform hierarchy based on the notion of purity and pollution. For him, caste exists in multiple hierarchies. Even if a hierarchy is destroyed, it may not even have an effect on the whole structure.

In caste politics, multiple alliances are formed among multiple *jatis*, which are also as easily severed. Such alliances did not occur only because of democracy and election, although it does exaggerate it. Gupta claims that such alliances were formed in the earlier centuries. He further argues that caste politics is not Brahmin versus the rest, which is very reductive and belies the complexity of Indian caste politics.

Gupta forcefully argues that caste is also changing and not immutable. For instance, one can only “rarely” correlate caste and occupation in contemporary India (which, for Wilkerson, was one of the eight pillars of caste). He contends that caste is distinguished from race in that race is a bipolar antagonism —“arranged along a continuum of colour”— between blacks and whites. In contrast to Wilkerson’s thesis, it is race that instead becomes fixed as there is an “objective indication” of which category a person belongs to, which, for him, doesn’t exist in caste.

A Case For *Caste*

In reading Gupta stressing the difference between caste and race, one is also led to ponder whether there is an essential difference between his conception of a caste system and that of Wilkerson. If there is a difference, is it at the level of discursive knowledge? Is Wilkerson employing a general, abstract concept of caste while Gupta engages with the historically contingent notion found in India?

Gerald D. Berreman (1960) claims that caste can be accurately defined in broader terms and not just in a way that is applicable only to India. He argues that for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison, such generalisation, without denying the differences, is necessary and that caste might well be applied cross-culturally. In this sense, it can be argued that Gupta sees caste in a way that is narrowly defined to work only in India, while Wilkerson takes to a broader definition, which allows her to go beyond a specific cultural context. And what is the broader definition? In the broader sense, Berreman defines a caste system as a “hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent” (Berreman, 1960, p. 120). This definition should be seen as describing an ideal type. If this is accepted, then Wilkerson’s thesis becomes tenable and slightly relieves her from the charge of accepting an ahistorical view of caste.

Countering the view that Cox, among others, has asserted that caste in India is passively accepted, that the subordinate groups accept their lots, Berreman argues that such views arise because of the unrealistic notion of caste. When comparing, the Indian caste is viewed as how it is supposed to work rather than

how it does work, while American race relations are seen as how they work. The former is conceived in an idealised manner, while the latter is viewed pragmatically and realistically.

To further support the case, Berreman stresses that although there are differences in ideological justification of the acts and the definition it— they are cultural details which are symbolic rather than literal. Their essential similarity is in the structure and functions in that the caste system has institutionalised inequality as its fundamental feature.

Just as Wilkerson argued in *Caste* that race (colour) is the visible tool or the marker of caste, the caste of a person in India, as Berreman argues, is determined by their dwelling area, occupation, place of worship, etc. In both places, membership to a caste is ascribed by birth, and it is hereditary, passed down over generations and families. It is an endogamous relation divided along the lines of purity and pollution in which one group is considered inherently inferior and not to be treated as equals. The social psychology of being considered inherently inferior also reveals another facet of caste, that “caste”, as Ambedkar puts it, “is a state of the mind.”

Rules of avoidance and segregation are written into the code of everyday life. In both, this unnatural system is maintained by powerful sanctions of the higher caste, both economic and physical. The sanction also comes in the form of enforced deference from the lower caste by the higher one. The system persists and perpetuates further due to the desire of the higher caste to retain their gains— economic, sexual and prestige— for themselves and their children.

The hierarchy of caste is mainly in terms of economic resources and access to goods and services. In both places, castes are economically interdependent. As Wilkerson argues, the exploitation of the African-Americans under slavery built the riches of (white) America. In the same way, the upper caste benefitted from the continuous degradation of the lower caste, which was perpetuated by the enforced division of labour. Thus, it becomes in the interest of the higher caste to preserve the system, and for this, they operate, among others, the myth of divine sanction.

One unique feature of caste in India is that of the belief in the religious promise of reward in the next life for performing their caste duties in the present. This generally means an increase in wealth and reverence for the high caste while further subordination of the lower caste in service of the high caste. Critics have pressed that this feature of caste ultimately distinguished it from race relations in America and served to explain why the subordinates are content with their lot. Berreman, however, argues that

such beliefs and their prevalence are related to the vested interest of the higher caste in maintaining the system and have no semblance to reality. And more interestingly, such arguments and biases were also used by the whites in the antebellum South. Wilkerson quotes one U.S. Senator as saying, “The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slave” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 131). Wilkerson also notes how the popular biblical story of Noah’s *Three Sons* was used as justification for the predicaments of the blacks in slavery. However, the white slave owners went even further to incorporate science from which an abomination was born: eugenics.

Berremán points out a number of similarities of the system of hierarchy in the two places. Ultimately, he holds that the term caste system is applicable at “the present time” in the southern United States. Regardless of the time period, what Berremán’s essay has done is helpfully distinguish an abstract concept of caste from that of an Indian-specific idea of caste. If this distinction is accepted, then caste as a concept can be applied cross-culturally. In the last section of this paper, we will look at the global milieu that surrounds the politics of such comparison.

The Violence Of Translation

Before moving to the last section, it is important to address another similarity between race and caste, which may well be the most significant that race and caste are both products of modernity. Race is a concept that was invented by European slave owners to justify racism. While caste, as Nikolas Durk argues, rather than being an Indian tradition is a modern phenomenon.

Before gaining political and economic authority, the colonial power attempted to establish epistemic hegemony over the colonial population. According to Rolando Vazquez (2011), translation is one of the necessary practices for establishing hegemony and expansion of modernity’s epistemic territory. It is a constitutive practice of modernity and of the other side of modernity: coloniality. It is steeped in power relations and served for long the needs of imperial design.

Translation is seen initially as a mechanism through which the scriptural text of modernity expands and occupies its place. However, as Vazquez argues, this process also concurrently erases or renders invisible those that did not fit in the “parameters of legibility” of modernity’s epistemic territory. This erasure comes by a movement of incorporation that subdues the multiple, turns contingency into continuity and collapses differences into a logic of identity and sameness. Essentially, European

knowledge systems are applied in many parts of the world, and the distorted results that come from it are established as the truth of the particular society.

As Gupta argued, the early Indologists and the Orientalists brought in a race-based explanation of the system of social division found in India found in India. Race, being a white European man's invention, was transposed to other parts of the world and observed through that lens. The narrative of 'fair Aryans' conquering the 'dark Dravidian' was pushed forward as it also fits into the narrative of the British conquest. In the many years that followed the translation of Brahminical texts as a reference for understanding a heterogeneous society, the elimination of indigenous community knowledge and practices and of positing a race hierarchy have done innumerable damage, so much so that it is becoming difficult to justify the 'post' in post-colonialism.

The forceful application of modernity's knowledge system, the inclusion, exclusion and erasure has guaranteed the stability of knowledge but the destruction of the people whose non-scientific knowledge was erased. The power to maintain stability is guaranteed by another feature of modernity—classification. The classification of the world is a key process in the expansion of modernity's epistemic territory (Vazquez, 2011, p. 34). Classification objectives, institute ordering and the mapping of the world. It naturalises hierarchies. This knowledge system promotes an image of the world as a representation governed by universal reason and those that excess modernity's epistemic territory are dismissed as myths.

The institute of 'race' is modernity's mechanism of classification and appropriation. It is a mapping of the world that sits at the origin of modernity. Race, being constative of modernity, is also the product and instrument of colonialism. Race relations are manifested in the political and economic conditions of colonisation. In this light, Alia Al-Saji (2010) discusses the process of racialisation that goes behind the representational image of the veiling of Muslim women.

From June 2009 to 2010, France saw a renewed interest in the debate around the question of veiling, ultimately banning it under the "Law of 2010-1192: Act prohibiting concealment of the face in public space". Revisiting the debate around the same in 2004, Al-Saji discusses the role that representation of the veil plays in a Western context.

Discussing the French government's attempt to ban the wearing of the veil by school children, she argues that secularism, in French republican term *laïcité*, wasn't sufficient to trigger a ban as *laïcité*

allows for the wearing of the veil or any religious outfit as an exercise of freedom of conscience. The pro-law proponents gained the upper hand only when gender equality was mobilised as continuous with *laïcité*. Here, the image of gender oppression was projected exclusively onto Islam and naturalised in the bodies of veiled women. Islam came to be seen as constitutive of suppressing women, and the veil became the conspicuous sign that represents it. This, Al-Saji contends, is a form of racialisation.

However, the Western representation of veiled women is not about the Muslim women themselves but about fulfilling a different function, “they provide the foil or negative mirror in which constructions of identity and gender can be positively reflected” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 877). What the Muslim woman is, the Western woman is not. The veil of Muslim women signifies subjugation, de-subjectification, and lack of agency, whereas Western women are the epitome of free and gender equality. Thus, the ‘West’ is an imaginary formation that constitutes itself through the representation of others; the ‘black’ as the other of ‘white’ is constituted through a mechanism of abjection. For Al-Saji, it is through the process of racialisation that such mirroring is made possible. To augment the argument, she draws heavily on Franz Fanon’s work, which discusses the social psychology of the French colonialist’s fixation on unveiling the Muslim women in Algeria.

In his essay, ‘Algeria Unveiled’ (1994), Fanon equates the French colonial project to unveil Algerian women to the colonial project of destroying Algerian culture. However, Al-Saji argues that it was more than the destruction of society but also to construct its self-image, a mirror in which colonial ways of seeing and gendering could be normed. Fanon further elucidates the way in which anti-Black racism of white culture constitutes the ‘black’ as other to the ‘white’ self through a mechanism of abjection. (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 884). The undesirable elements of the self were projected onto the ‘black’ other, and though they are relative to one another, these identities were constituted as mutually exclusive. This is supported by naturalising race as a property of the black body. This seeming natural condition serves to justify the very racist logic that produces them, that the blacks were inherently inferior and the whites inherently superior. As Wilkerson also points out, theological explanations and science were also brought in to concretise this illusion of naturalness. This black ‘other’ also became the scapegoat for all of society’s ill.

However, it is also imperative to discuss the terms that were used in the debate leading up to the banning of veiling in 2004 because it is what laid the seed in the first place. It represents a case of translation by erasure. The law is commonly referred to as the law on the headscarf or veil, a name that represents the

main religious sign that the law has targeted. Terming it as a headscarf is an adaptation of an innocuous and familiar article of clothing, *le foulard*. (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 878). Seeing it as a mere article of clothing makes it seem like a mere symbol and can be removed without affecting the bodily sense of the women wearing it. This translation erases the cultural-religious bodily practices that veiling defines and the complex dynamic history in which it participates. The Arabic term *hijab* was never used as it was foreign to the French and outside the realm of modernity's epistemic territory. Instead, the use of the term 'veil' serves the Islamophobic, racist and colonial sensitivity of the French white public: veiling invokes a history of negative and static stereotypes and one of regressive gender practices. It is the strategic use of the terms itself and the translation of it that allows for the hostility that ensued against the practice of veiling.

Border Thinking And The Future Ahead

As Rolando Vazquez argues, translation can be thought of not just as an erasure but also as a plurality. Translation as plurality articulates the configuration of dialogues and the thinking of border that challenges the modern/colonial system of oppression (2011, p. 27). It defines a territory that is dialogic and plural. On the one hand, translation suppresses differences between languages, but on the other hand, it also makes us aware of our differences. To speak of translation and the border of modernity's epistemic territory is to acknowledge already that there is a limit to modernity's universal claim that there is life beyond modernity. This limit of modernity's epistemic territory is also a site of rebellion against hegemony and the celebration of plurality. The practice or notion is articulated by Walter D. Mignolo as 'border thinking' in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

Border thinking, for Mignolo, "is a particular version of diatopic thinking; and its hermeneutics articulates the particular version of experience that operates on the awareness and power differential." (2011, p. 16). The power differential is the imperial and colonial differential. This particular brand of thinking allows for the existence of multiple truths and multiple takes on reality. It is an epistemology that emerges from those that are left out of modernity's epistemology, those that lie at the border of modernity's territory. To quote Mignolo:

Therefore, border epistemology emerges from the exteriority (not the outside, but the outside invented in the process of creating the identity of the inside, that is, Christian Europe) of the modern/colonial world, from bodies squeezed between imperial languages and those languages and categories of thought negated by and expelled from the house of imperial knowledge.

In this context, emerging political movements and struggles around the world are challenging the dominant power. In various ways, terms are being re-articulated and re-signified for the emerging practices of freedom and multiple ways of being. As Mignolo articulates, the first *nomos* never died totally with the rise of the second *nomos*, and now we are witnessing the rise of a polycentric world with a unitary economic principle. But what is exciting about the new *nomos* is the major role that global social movements play in shaping the future. New and unexpected alliances are being formed; the hegemonic order is being challenged.

In this light, we can look at the politics of Wilkerson's *Caste* as one deeply rooted in the global but non-hegemonic articulation of the lived experience of those dismissed by Western modernity and the attempt to reach out to those who share the same fate. The Dalit activist's attempt to incorporate caste into the discourse of race may not have come about keeping in mind fantastic ideas and facts about their similarities but about the common struggle they wage. It may be a testament to the fact that no person exploited by the higher group continues to want to be exploited; it is a testament to the fact that everyone has liberty and self-determination. Yes, it is a contestable claim whether caste is race or race is caste or whether America has a caste system or India has a race hierarchy. That debate will go on. But it would also be a mistake on our part not to acknowledge the political strategy involved in the works going beyond geographical and cultural boundaries to seek common space for the coming movements.

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