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Casting Race in Another Light

Colonialism, Orientalism & Wilkerson's Caste

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Arguing that race in America is actually caste, Isabel Wilkerson seeks to startle the readers who may have become numbed by debates on race. But by overplaying what is not much more than a clever analogy, she might actually be weakening her argument.

Discussions of Isabel Wilkerson's 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, are everywhere. It was hailed by celebrities including [Barack Obama](#) and [Oprah Winfrey](#) and received rave reviews in almost all major media publications in the United States and serious newspapers in other parts of the world. It stayed for weeks on various [bestseller lists across the US](#), and was [nominated for innumerable awards](#). The book has even been the [subject of academic panels](#).

Wilkerson's book is undoubtedly important, tracing a 400-year history of the institutional racism that shapes American common sense about people based on skin colour. Brilliantly written, in a style seamlessly blending anecdote and history, individual plight and systemic factors, the book is a scathing indictment of both the history and the present of racism in the US.

As scholar of South Asia, though, I have to ask why, to make that point, did Wilkerson have to title the book 'Caste'?

[W.E.B. Du Bois made comparisons between race and class as early as the 1930s](#). (Du Bois 1933, 177) But Wilkerson is the first to claim that *race* is merely *the skin*, the more superficial aspect of the problem, whose real structural underpinnings — whose *bones*, in her words — are better understood as caste. (Wilkerson, 19) Are the structural underpinnings of racism in America comparable to caste in India in a significant way?

The short answer to that question must be in the negative.

A shocking history of racism

Wilkerson is no scholar of caste, and it is unfair to critique her for the inability to delve into complexities or debates between scholars on caste. Her definition of caste as, “a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry” (Wilkerson, 17), could describe a variety of hierarchical systems, including those based on race and gender. Believing in the presumed superiority of one group and the inferiority of others is hardly unique to caste. Nor is the idea that notions of presumed superiority or inferiority of racial groups have been internalised, and almost become common sense. While one sees the comparison with caste, an oppressive ideology accepted and internalised by both the oppressors and the oppressed is hardly unique to caste. Wilkerson should not have to look as far as India when so many of in the US still buy into the myth of the American Dream.

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So why title this book *Caste*, a term primarily used to describe social hierarchies in India? The only purpose I can think of is that doing so shocks her readers into acknowledging the deep and abiding hierarchical ideological underpinnings of American society on matters of race.

Wilkerson wrote and published her book at a time when the discourse of white supremacism was at its most vocal and visible in recent years. It is understandable she wanted something to jolt her readers out into acknowledging the seriousness of racism. She chose 'caste' because its historical usage in the western world is associated with a brutal, immutable, and fixed hierarchy supported by an ideology that has permeated deeply into the cultural fabric.

Understood in this fashion, caste is the polar opposite of all that liberal individualism stands for. By arguing that race in America is actually caste, Wilkerson seeks to startle the readers who may have become numbed by debates on race and compel them to examine the reality of racism in the world around them.

Given the exceptional reception the book has received, she has clearly succeeded in that effort. However, outside of the shock value, I am not sure what the use of the term ‘caste’ really does to either better understand race in the US or gather more support for the battle against racism.

These stories would have moved audiences whether she termed it ‘race’ or ‘caste’. For those who are not moved by her narrative, it would not matter.

It does raise other problems, however. What is for liberal sensibilities the unique and most appalling aspect of caste, is the belief that people are “locked forever in birth-determined positions.” This is the understanding of caste that Wilkerson deploys for her comparison. She focuses on the fixity, rigidity, and unchangeable nature of caste, drawing upon example after example to demonstrate how racial distinctions in the US operate in similar ways. She uses this comparison with caste to bring to the readers’ attention a shocking history of racism deeply imbedded in American society. Regardless of economic or professional success, Wilkerson convincingly argues that African Americans are regarded as inferior, almost impure, much as Dalits are in India.

As a literary device, as a way to draw attention to a harrowing, terrible, and unjust inequality in American history and contemporary society, Wilkerson’s use of ‘caste’ works well. But then, the power of her stories and her storytelling are such that these stories would have moved audiences whether she termed it race or caste. For those who are not moved by her narrative, it would not matter if she called her book *Caste* or *Race*. The former is more shocking, though.

Orientalising caste

Wilkerson’s purpose, as her subtitle makes apparent, is to address the origins of the discontent in the US. To do that, unfortunately she ends up relying on a very colonial and deeply Orientalist understanding of caste in India as rigid, timeless, and unchanging (Dirks, 2001).

The idea of an unchanging, static, backward Orient was a classic trope of Orientalists — themselves products and enablers of colonialism — through which they produced the western self (Said 1978). This Orientalism, in turn, influenced later scholars who contrasted India’s *Homo Hierarchicus* with the *Homo Equalis* of the western world (Dumont 1980).

Wilkerson could have demonstrated the parallel social constructions of caste in India as well. But doing that would undermine the possibility of positing caste as the absolute other of equality.

Despite arguing that race creates abiding and fundamentally unchanging hierarchies in America, it is important to note that Wilkerson’s book does not suggest that American DNA includes strands of *Homo Hierarchicus*. Rather than portray the entire American society as characterised by a primordial and irremediable hierarchy, Wilkerson characterises caste in America as a pathology, as a flaw, “left unattended in the original foundation” (Wilkerson, 15). Far from representing it as “natural”, Wilkerson carefully and systematically builds an argument to demonstrate how racism in America is a social construct, created, transformed and reproduced to benefit the ruling elite. The many examples of brave resistance to slavery and racism recounted in her book also recuperate the possibility of realising *Homo Equalis* — but only in America.

In a book titled *Caste*, Wilkerson could have demonstrated the parallel social constructions of caste in India as well. But doing that would undermine the possibility of positing caste as the absolute other of equality, an Other that transcends and exceeds the othering offered by race. It would certainly have undermined the shock value afforded by relying on Orientalist reading of caste.

The politics of knowledge

Despite her international travels to research this book, it is evident the author remains quite unaware of the global inequalities of knowledge production. At the end of the chapter about her visit to India, she writes about a group of African American professors who visited a village in north India, where Dalit activists “sang Dalit liberation songs for the occasion.” The singers then invited their American guests to sing a liberation song of their own. It was then, Wilkerson tells us, that one of them “began a song that the civil

rights marchers sang in Birmingham and Selma before they faced sheriffs’ dogs and water hoses. As he reached the refrain, the Dalit hosts joined in and began to sing with their American counterparts. Across the oceans, they well knew the words to ‘We Shall Overcome’” (Wilkerson 77).

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The story is a touching one, and Wilkerson presents it as an example of global solidarity of oppressed peoples. Most of her audience will probably read it as such too. The story, though, also raises a question about the inequalities of global knowledge production. Why is it that the Dalit villagers knew the lyrics to an American protest song, but the better-educated professors knew none of the songs of Dalit liberation? Why does Wilkerson feel this deserves no commentary? Even more importantly perhaps, why do most of us, Indian and American alike, read this as quite natural? After all, should we not expect the opposite to be true?

The reason Wilkerson does not dwell on that question, and the reason why most of us do not either, is because knowledge produced in the West is simply assumed to be superior, most universal, and hence, worthy of emulation. We expect people to be familiar with artefacts of western culture, but not the other way around. By not asking that question, Wilkerson, and indeed most of us, are complicit in a project that naturalises western dominance over the non-western world.

The fact that the author and much of her audience treat the globalisation of a very American cultural artefact as somehow “natural” hides, occludes, the vast inequality between the West and the non-West, created by imperialism and colonialism. Colonialism ensured that there was hierarchy of knowledge, with knowledge produced in metropolitan centres definitionally superior to anything from the colonised peoples. Wilkerson’s book demonstrates that this history of colonialism continues to shape the lenses she uses to look at the world, the evaluative mechanisms she applies, and the categories employed to analyse it.

Colonialism did not simply disparage indigenous knowledge; it produced its own knowledge about the colonised. Nowhere was this more the case than about “the caste system” in India. Out of a welter of complex, often highly localised hierarchies, the British distilled what they termed “the caste system.” To do this, they had to ignore complex and contested hierarchies, changes over time, and the close connections of what they termed caste, to political and economic power (Dirks, 2001). The power of colonial knowledge, though, ensured that it was their understanding of caste that prevailed, both in India and across the world (Cohn, 1987; Inden, 1990). That we still inhabit this world is apparent in several ways, including in Wilkerson’s book.

The complexions of caste

By overplaying what is not much more than a clever analogy, Wilkerson might actually be weakening her argument than strengthening it. She is no scholar of caste in India and ends up making errors of an elementary nature. For the most part, when she is referring to caste, she refers to the *varna* cosmology. To point to a much deeper and older hierarchical tradition than race shaping hierarchies in America, Wilkerson argues that *varna*, “predates the idea of race, and thus is farther reaching, deeper, and older than raw racism and the comparatively new division of humans by skin color” (67). Yet, the very word ‘varna’ means colour in Sanskrit. Krishna, for instance, is described as “*shyama varna*” — of dark coloured skin.

A deeper understanding of the complex history of varna-jati would probably have given Wilkerson second thoughts about easy use of the phrase.

She also overlooks the fact that the so-called caste system is ultimately occupation based. The lived unit of caste society are thousands of *jatis*, divided into an almost-infinite number of ranks. Even the lowest ranked *jati* has another who performs polluting tasks for them, perhaps from a neighbouring village. This produces what Babasaheb Ambedkar called “graded inequality.” [There is nothing comparable among the African American population in the US.](#)

The history of *varna-jatis* is a very complex one, with the status of a particular *jati* often dependent upon their access to economic resources and, critically, political power. There are historical examples of kings from *jatis* today classified as Shudra or Dalit. Many *jatis* classified as low on the *varna* scale have community histories that refer to a time when defeat in battle or court intrigues consigned them to low *varna* status. The idea that there was a singular ‘caste system’ that locked people into their status in perpetuity, was, if anything, a construct of British colonialism. It was a way in which the British could contrast their enlightened ideas with those

of the brutal, rigid, backward and uncivilised Indians (Dirks, 2001).

A deeper understanding of the complex history of varna-jati would probably have given Wilkerson second thoughts about easy use of the phrase. An exploration of Indian history and society, though, is not the purpose of her book. The book is very much about and meant to address an audience in the US. She has, as a result, [very little to say about the experiences of lower caste Indians](#).

Conclusion

In pointing to the limitations of this book, my aim is not to challenge the central thesis about systemic racism in America, and certainly not to mount any sort of defence of caste in India. The varna-jati order has never been a system of harmonious division of labour that some upper caste revisionists claim it to be. Whatever the complexity of their history and textual lineages, varna cosmologies have enabled the brutal oppression of lower jatis and women of all castes. Caste has encouraged the dispossession, marginalisation and dehumanisation of large sections of Indian society. It has permitted access to economic, cultural and social capital to some (and I include myself among those so privileged) and denied that to the majority of the people in the subcontinent.

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Many positive changes have come about over time, particularly since the Constitution of India came into effect in 1950, with Babasaheb Ambedkar as chair of the drafting committee of the Constitution. Affirmative action programmes, though imperfectly implemented, have empowered sections of the Dalit community. Yet, despite these, the historical advantages enjoyed by upper castes ensures we remain as dominant groups across the country. In fact, the marginal empowerment of Dalits creates a pushback, and violence against Dalits by upper castes has [grown demonstrably in recent times](#).

Given all of this, it is not surprising that Dalit activists have welcomed Wilkerson's book for the global attention it has directed toward caste. [Yashica Dutt](#) celebrates "Wilkerson's radical framing of racial injustice as a system of caste, aligning the struggles of Black Americans with those of Dalits." Arguing that it "elevates thousands of years of Dalit trauma and struggle into the global spotlight in a single swoop," Dutt welcomes how Wilkerson's book, "obliterates decades of New Delhi's diplomatic attempts to prevent caste from getting the global notoriety it has always deserved."

A rising star in the field of Dalit Studies, [Suraj Yengde](#), says Wilkerson's "engaging text allows the experiences of oppressed people from both countries to sit across from each other and not feel like strangers because of their superficial 'differences.'" It is certainly interesting though, that in the same essay, Yengde makes an important critique of "dominant-caste scholars [who] have made careers studying Dalits and their condition, while paying little or no attention to their own caste privileges as a project of social science study." Yet, he makes no mention at all of the privileges available to a western, globetrotting, former Pulitzer Prize winning, author.

Yengde rightly argues that Wilkerson's book reveals "so many parallels between oppressed castes in different societies that their experiences naturally align. They become simulacra — like gasping at the sight of one's own reflection in a mirror." But mirrors don't just reflect, they also distort. We also gasp at our reflections in a house of mirrors we encounter at fairs.

The parallels that Wilkerson demonstrates in her book between oppressed groups in India and the US certainly exist, but so do acute differences. Colonialism and capitalism that brought Africans to the Americas also distorted, reified, and transformed ideas about caste in India. It is ironic, but hardly unique, that an effort to challenge one hierarchy created by colonialism would seek to rely on another colonial construction, namely 'the caste system.'

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